

Intimacy in Print: Literary Celebrity and Public Interiority in Nineteenth-Century American
Literature

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Abstract

KARAH REMPE: *Intimacy in Print: Literary Celebrity and Public Interiority in
Nineteenth-Century American Literature*
(Under the direction of Philip Gura and Eliza Richards)

This dissertation explores the ways in which authors, editors, and readers negotiated conflicting desires for intimacy and privacy during a period of mass media expansion in the antebellum United States. Mass production and distribution of texts, especially in the turbulent world of periodicals, radically altered the conditions of authorship in the United States by providing the infrastructure for an emerging mass culture that sustained a new form of national literary celebrity. Although the burgeoning antebellum print landscape enabled innovative editors and literary celebrities to reach a record number of American readers, the increasingly impersonal public sphere fueled a sense of alienation among expanding readerships. The growing distance between authors and readers prompted many readers to seek access to the private lives of authors by reading their published works. As a result, authors were compelled to, as Nathaniel Hawthorne observed sardonically, “serve up their own hearts delicately fried, with brain-sauce, as a tidbit for their beloved public.” Authors and readers were engaged in a public exchange of intimacy that forced authors to police their personal boundaries during the period in which they became most remote from their reading publics. This paradoxical intimacy in print characterizes the “public interiority” that celebrity authors offered readers.

Focusing on the affective component of author-reader relationships, the project considers how changes in print production, distribution, and circulation generated a new and often unnerving market for intimacy between authors and readers. “Intimacy in Print” presents a new

perspective on the rise of literary celebrity in nineteenth-century America by exploring the interplay between authors' "public interiority" in print, editorial manipulation, readers' desire for intimate exchange, and each party's complex responses to the changing literary and cultural landscape.

To Margaret Anderson & Jonathan Hiam

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Introduction

Although no stranger to scandal, Nathaniel Parker Willis was particularly vexed by accusations of impropriety and infamy in the spring of 1851. Publicly accused of seducing actor Edwin Forrest's wife, Catherine, Willis was embroiled in their well-publicized divorce case. Moreover, his standing as an author and editor was in question due to his own injudicious editorial use of reader correspondence. A new series in his *Home Journal*, "Returned Love Letters," drew fire from critics who accused Willis of commercializing the authentic sentiments of his readers by reprinting their fan letters in the magazine; others claimed Willis had simply fabricated the correspondence, arguing that "nobody but just such a man as he is, ever wrote any such letters." By reprinting letters purporting to be from actual readers, Willis' "Returned Love Letters" did more than cash in on the lavish praise of readers; by modeling readers' emotional responses to Willis, the driving personality shaping the *Home Journal*, the series corroborated and celebrated readers' emotional attachment to a man they knew only through the printed page. Moreover, the series of reprinted fan letters soon came to be used against an embattled Willis in the court of public opinion. In May 1851, James Watson Webb threatened to publish a set of real love letters written to Willis that confirmed long-held suspicions that the popular poet seduced young women—literally—with his poetry. A longtime critic of Willis, Webb threatened to publish details from the letters in order to punish Willis for the grief of his alleged victim's family. Webb's allegations swirled through the press and resulted in much speculation over the identity of the young woman in question. Although Willis was the recipient rather than author of the letters in question, the young woman's expressed familiarity and intimacy with Willis

landed him in hot water; her emotional responses to Willis' public personality and print presence were damningly echoed by the other anonymous readers featured in the "Returned Love Letters" series. Willis responded by naming the content of the letters as the natural response of reader to celebrity, thereby confirming the power of the written text to elicit strong emotional responses in readers: "What sentiment in them was addressed to myself, I never thought twice of—for it is such as is addressed often to those who are the supposed gate keepers of celebrity and appreciation. An Editor's drawer is full of such propitiatory compliments, and he is indeed silly if he consider them as anything but the toll to the pathway of fame."¹

Willis dismisses these private expressions of emotional attachment as commonplace, the cost, or "toll," of doing business as a celebrity. Historical evidence supports Willis' contention; fan letters written to contemporary literary celebrities like Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Fanny Fern, Edgar Allan Poe, Donald Grant Mitchell, Louisa May Alcott, Walt Whitman, and others showcase an array of affective responses to authors and their works. Willis' troubling correspondent, Mary Inman Coddington, quickly claimed the letters and ultimately disputed Webb's claim to them, turning public opinion against him, the avenger of her honor. Yet it is striking that her emotional response to text and author could be so easily misconstrued for a narrative of private affection and emotional seduction. Certainly Willis' reputation as a "man of the world" and latent distrust over the privacy of the reading experience laid the groundwork for Webb's accusations.² The very public nature of the episode, at the apex of Willis' involvement

¹ Quoted in Thomas Baker, *Sentiment and Celebrity: Nathaniel Parker Willis and the Trials of Literary Fame* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999) 138. Baker details the Webb-Inman letter scandal in detail, noting that Willis had returned letters written by Inman at her request, a fact that substantially weakened Webb's claims about Willis' impropriety.

² Nina Baym, *Novels, Readers, and Reviewers: Responses to Fiction in Antebellum America* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1984). Baym discusses fears that novel reading fostered a "dangerous privatism and individualism" that could potentially weaken the social character of the home (50). Of course reviewers occasionally equated the act of reading with sexual excitement, although as Baym argues, this was largely confined to the first half of the nineteenth century (59).

in the Forrest divorce case, illustrates both the pleasures and the risks posed by celebrity status. As a circulating, public personality, the celebrity encouraged affective allegiance on the part of audiences; however, as Mary Inman Coddington's letters illustrate, expressions of intimacy and familiarity engendered by the celebrity figure could often prove discomfiting. Indeed, Thomas Baker contends that Webb's accusations were so quickly silenced because members of the press and other social elites, Willis' "jury," were threatened by the way in which Webb used fan mail to condemn a public man. Willis' contemporaries were anxious as to whether similar letters written to ministers, politicians, and poets could cast aspersions on otherwise innocent celebrities.³ Members of an emerging celebrity coterie in antebellum America struggled both to capitalize on the benefits of fame and to insulate themselves from threats and accusations similar to those faced by Willis. By mid-century, guidelines and expectations for authors, promoters, and audiences were in flux, thanks in large part to the emergence of a mass media marketplace in the United States that created and sustained a new form of national literary celebrity.

Willis was among the growing ranks of American literary celebrities who inspired emotional reader responses to their personalities and their published works. At the height of *Little Women* furor, for example, over one hundred ardent readers visited the Alcott family home in Concord each month hoping to meet the author or her family. Unannounced reader visits were so common for Longfellow that the poet began to keep a box of autographs on the mantle at Craigie House in anticipation of visitors. These undisciplined responses illustrate in a rather exaggerated fashion readers' propensity to identify emotionally with celebrated strangers. This project explores the ways in which authors, editors, and readers negotiated conflicting desires for

³ As David Henkin observes, private letters made their way into popular print in a variety of mid-century scandals, and in so doing, these "material artifacts of private emotional life [could be used] to violate the very privacy they registered." See David M Henkin, *The Postal Age: The Emergence of Modern Communications in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2006) 102-103.

intimacy and privacy during a period of mass media expansion in the antebellum United States. Massive changes in antebellum print production, distribution, and circulation created a national infrastructure for an emerging mass culture. This new and often unnerving national “market for intimacy” between producers and consumers of texts traded upon the affective component of author-reader relationships, transforming printed texts, the authorial persona, and readers’ emotions into commodities in an expanded system of emotional exchange.⁴ Although the burgeoning antebellum print landscape enabled innovative editors and literary celebrities to reach a record number of American readers, the changing national scope of the print public sphere fueled a sense of alienation among expanding readerships. As one contemporary reviewer described, many readers sought to “go beyond the book” by writing reams of fan mail, publishing tribute poems, and embarking on pilgrimages to author’s homes. Engaged in a public exchange of intimacy with readers, authors were forced to police their personal boundaries during the period in which they became most remote from their reading publics.

The public life and print production of celebrity authors offered readers a form of “public interiority” that encouraged readers to form intimate attachments to texts and their creators. Expressions of intimacy and familiarity directed at celebrities speak to a desire for emotional connection with those Richard Sheckel describes as “intimate strangers.”⁵ During a chaotic time of industrialization and an expanding national mass media, expressions of intimacy between authors and readers served as thin lines cast out into a teeming sea of public personalities. In other words, the acts of reading, purchasing periodicals and books, and actively responding to texts and authors were more than enlightening or entertaining for many readers.

⁴ Baker 7.

⁵ Richard Sheckel, *Intimate Strangers: The Culture of Celebrity* (New York: Doubleday and Co., 1985). Peter Coviello notes that feelings of sympathy, belonging, and identification “traveled under the sign of ‘intimacy’” at mid-century. Peter Coviello, *Intimacy in America: Dreams of Affiliation in Antebellum America* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005) 4-6. See also Lauren Berlant, *Intimacy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

As local markers of identity were replaced by a national taste, courtesy of a flourishing periodicals market and improved distribution and production networks, printed materials had the ability to act as a tonic against the inherent anonymity of the expanding print public sphere.⁶ Considering the celebrity in relation to Max Weber's theories of political charisma, Gordon Rogoff argues that "charisma is, by definition, a description of shared needs"; audiences, as Joseph Roach speculates, have culturally and historically specific reasons for responding emotionally to the public intimacy proffered by celebrities.⁷ As popular audiences in the United States became increasingly enthralled by the culture of celebrity, popular magazines and newspapers featured extensive information about the private lives of popular authors, in addition to publishing their literary productions; this shift suggests, as David Haven Blake observes, "a growing tendency to elevate persona over content, to value the performance, background, or inner life of individuals alongside their substantive accomplishments."⁸ With the glut of images, gossip, and biography circulating around them, celebrities answered a "shared need" of mid-nineteenth century audiences; they functioned as representational individuals in a largely impersonal and increasingly national mass culture.

Celebrity in all forms—literary, theatrical, political—is ephemeral. Not only is time spent in the limelight at the mercy of a capricious public, the celebrity-audience relationship is one built on illusion, performance, and publicity. As Roach argues, "public intimacy describes the illusion of proximity to the tantalizing apparition...[and feeds] cravings for greater intimacy with

⁶ See for example Ronald Zboray, *A Fictive People: Antebellum Economic Development and the American Reading Public* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993). Zboray describes the emerging national mass culture as a "homogenous national culture" (xvi), a characterization I disagree with because it fails to acknowledge the vast variety of materials available to print consumers. While the increasing ubiquity of a national taste did eliminate some variety in printed materials, the notion of the antebellum period's vast and mercurial world of print as "homogenous" is reductive.

⁷ Rogoff quoted in Joseph Roach, *It* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007) 12.

⁸ David Haven Blake, *Walt Whitman and the Culture of American Celebrity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006) 42.

the ultimately unavailable icon.”⁹ Roach’s definition of the celebrity’s main product, “public intimacy,” emphasizes the illusive, insubstantial, and ultimately unrequited nature of readers’ emotional quest for identification with public strangers. As a result, the questions that drive this study are less interested in gauging the reality or “truth” of readers’ emotional encounters with authors, whether in print, correspondence, or in person, and are more interested in considering why an increasingly mass-mediated audience sought communion with “the tantalizing apparition” of literary celebrity. I argue that by exhibiting a form of private narrative in both their published works and the publicity surrounding such works, literary celebrities were uniquely positioned to offer a form of public interiority for a curious public. While literary celebrities were buffeted by the same machinery of publicity and promotion that created celebrity actors, performers, and lecturers, their cultivation of accessible authorial personae and identifiable print identities encouraged readers to affectively respond to their well-publicized and finely crafted public personalities. Literary celebrities also left a more substantial record of their presence in the minds and lives of antebellum readers; their performances in the public sphere, recorded in printed books, magazines, newspapers, and advertisements, were less ephemeral than the performances and lectures of their celebrity contemporaries. Theirs were sites of production that readers could return to, mull over, and craft responses to. By exploring the interplay between technological innovations, author-publisher relations, publicity, and reader response, this project investigates the people, texts, and ideas that created the culture of American celebrity.¹⁰

⁹ Roach 44.

¹⁰ Although the complex interplay between authors, publishers, and readers is now more frequently the focus of scholarly inquiry, such recognition was pioneered by early book historians like William Charvat, who argued against both literary histories written in an economic vacuum and book history scholarship focused solely on the business of publishing. The former divide between history of the book scholarship and reception studies, identified by Charvat, Cathy Davidson, and others, has now largely been bridged by new generations of critical works that investigate textual production and reception in conversation, enriching our understanding of the

Mass production and distribution of texts, especially in the turbulent world of periodicals, transformed the conditions of authorship in the United States by supplying the infrastructure for an emerging mass media culture.¹¹ The use of stereotyped, and later electrotyped, plates, made possible the large print runs of nineteenth-century American blockbusters like *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *Little Women*. When the modest first edition of Louisa May Alcott's novel sold out in less than one month, her publishers, Roberts Brothers of Boston, quickly produced more ambitious print runs. The flexibility of stereotyped plates also made Alcott's growing catalogue of texts more readily available in the marketplace; Roberts Brothers repeatedly "reissued" Alcott's body of work with new and enticing embellishments, such as the 1880 edition of *Little Women* that featured engraved images of both Alcott and her home, Orchard House. New developments in cylindrical and rotary presses, papermaking, binding, and engraving continued to improve production quality and speed throughout the mid-nineteenth century. As Michael Winship notes, organizers of the

burgeoning print culture in the antebellum period. Davidson's "history of texts" approach embraces what Charvat identified as the "tripartite author-publisher-reader relationship" of central import for scholars studying the interplay between producers, distributors, and consumers of printed texts (viii). See William Charvat, *The Profession of Authorship in America, 1800-1870*, ed. Matthew J. Bruccoli (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992) xvi; Cathy N. Davidson, *Revolution and the Word: The Rise of the Novel in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986) 4-5.

¹¹ Publishers gathered at the 1855 Crystal Palace exhibition attributed the unprecedented growth of their industry to the progress of technology; however, as both Michael Winship and Ronald Zboray caution, the logic of "technological determinism" oversimplifies the ways in which technological innovations in the fields of print production and distribution made broader cultural change possible. Yet despite these cautions, scholars largely agree that the development of stereotype sheets and the steam driven flatbed press (the Adams press) in the 1830s were, as Zboray contends, "the culmination in antebellum innovation in book printing" (9). American publishing houses large and small began using electrotypes or stereotype plates, thus hastening the end of painstaking arrangements of movable type for each new edition of text. The durability of typeset sheets, made from impressments of set type affixed to metal plates, enabled printers to produce multiple editions more economically, while the flatbed press and later the cylinder press could produce larger print runs of books and periodicals more quickly, and with less manpower, than ever before. Although a few Philadelphia printers used stereotype plates to print Bibles and school texts in the 1820s, the practice expanded significantly in the 1830s and 1840s. See Michael Winship, "Manufacturing and Book Production," *A History of the Book in America: The Industrial Book 1840-1880*, eds. Scott E. Casper, Jeffrey D. Groves, Stephen W. Nissenbaum and Michael Winship, v. 3, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2007) 53; see also Charvat, "The Conditions of Authorship in 1820" *The Profession of Authorship in America, 1800-1870* and Zboray "Reading and the Ironies of Technological Innovation" *A Fictive People*.

Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia displayed the latest innovations in power-driven iron and steel presses in Machinery Hall next to the hand press Benjamin Franklin had used when in London; the small, less efficient presses had become curiosities to exhibition attendees, relics of a pre-Industrial America that was fading into a distant past.

A combination of increased production capabilities, new periodicals outlets, larger subscriptions lists enabled by better distribution networks, and the rising call for a national literature resulted in an 800% increase in original American works between 1830-1853. Yet despite major improvements in printing capability and efficiency, a perennial problem remained: how to get texts to a growing nation of consumers. Systems put in place to distribute books and periodicals like traveling book agents, periodical depots, trade auctions, and trade papers, were the first steps toward creating a sustainable and reliable industry-wide distribution system that made texts available to national audiences.¹² This national market presence would eventually foster a mass media market that traded on name recognition and celebrity to garner attention from readers and boost sales.¹³ These new national distribution

¹² Zboray 3, 18.

¹³ However, the desire for this type of national media market outpaced the technological innovations that would make it possible. In the pre-Industrial United States, publishers and bookselling agents, even highly successful ones like Mathew Carey, struggled to make their goods readily available to the sprawling, largely rural, reading population. Publishers were severely limited without a distribution system that could penetrate rural interiors during bitter winter months that froze waterway access. With books moldering away in a warehouse one hundred miles from his home, Joseph Dennie, editor of the *Port Folio*, was unable to create and sustain a national market for his literary production in the first years of the nineteenth century, for example. Without a national system of transportation, floundering publisher David Carlisle could not reliably disseminate Dennie's work to reading communities beyond local booksellers and their agents (Charvat 14-18). Dennie's isolation and resulting failure as a professional author, no doubt exacerbated by his fierce Loyalist stance and bitter editorial tongue, stand in contrast to Mathew Carey's creative use of "sub-contractors" in his publishing venture. Carey's notable success in the 1790s was the result of a hybridized distribution and production system that networked with over fifty agents, printers, sellers, and postmasters to distribute texts of all kinds to largely untapped inland rural markets. Carey's association with book agent Parson Weems, and their infiltration of markets in the South and Southwest, allowed Carey to supply texts, in his own words, "to many places [in the South] to which not a single copy will go unless through us." (Quoted in Charvat 39). Indeed, Charvat asserts that Carey's influential success in distribution in the 1790s laid the foundation for Philadelphia's preeminence as a publishing center in the first four decades of the nineteenth century. However, Carey's relative success could not surmount the fundamental infrastructure barriers that prevented effective product distribution. While many publishers were able to distribute their wares in towns and cities along the Atlantic seaboard,

systems affected more than the delivery of products; increased exposure to a wider variety of printed materials changed the context in which books and periodicals were read.

Revolutionary industrial systems like the national railroad not only brought texts to a broader, national audience, the railroad also transformed Alcott's home in Concord into a pilgrimage site for enthusiastic readers of *Little Women*, much as Washington Irving's Sunnyside was touted as an accessible Mecca for a previous generation of admiring fans. Orchard House was only a short train ride away for those privileged readers hoping to see the "real life" inspirations for Alcott's beloved March sisters.¹⁴ In this sense, the development of a network for distribution of texts via railroad, coupled with Roberts Brothers' clever publicity, encouraged and facilitated the remarkable reader response to *Little Women*. In a satirical sketch for the *Springfield Republican* published May 1869, Alcott lampooned the reporters who invaded Concord: "Each spring brings, with the robins, a flock of reporters, who like the brisk and inquisitive birds, roost upon Concordian fences, chirp on Concordian doorsteps, and hop over Concordian hills and fields."¹⁵ Curious reporters, enthusiastic readers, and transcendental wanderers were drawn to Concord to pay homage and satisfy their curiosity; such desires were made possible by improved transportation and distribution systems.¹⁶

winter weather conditions rendered regular distribution networks impassable for up to five months annually. See also, Earl L. Bradshaw, *Mathew Carey: Editor, Author, and Publisher: A Study in American Literary Development* (New York: AMS Press, 1966).

¹⁴ The December 1856 *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* printed an illustration of Washington Irving's home, Sunnyside, and encouraged New York readers to make the short trip by steamer or rail to pay homage to Irving, sites of the Revolution, and his home. Quoted in Andrew Burstein, *The Original Knickerbocker: The Life of Washington Irving* (New York: Basic Books, 2007) 325.

¹⁵ Printed in the *Springfield Republican*, 5 May 1869.

¹⁶ With the advent of the railroad and express companies, the limitations imposed on publishers by weather conditions and distribution inconsistencies were replaced in part by new concerns about how to reach a network of potential buyers that spanned an increasingly unwieldy marketplace for print consumption. As

The surge of fans arriving at Alcott's doorstep speaks to what Zboray terms an "illusory, print-oriented connectedness" established between disparate strangers united by shared reading experiences.¹⁷ The increased availability of printed materials was an important factor in the "print-oriented connectedness" that united readers; shared reading experiences enabled disparate readers to emotionally respond to current events or fictional characters that they knew were being read by a large community of other readers. Nationally available printed materials necessarily engendered a shift from local to national print culture. According to Zboray, "the unprecedented flow of information from the railroad about distant events undermined the exclusivity of local self-definition."¹⁸ The "exclusivity of local self-definition" was rendered increasingly obsolete as local markers of identity were subsumed in the flood of information delivered by express carriers, the railroad, and increasingly, the telegraph. The telegraph, adopted by newspapers in the mid 1840s, was heralded by Horace Greeley's *Tribune* as "literally material thought" capable of "running in advance of time." The ecstatic language used by early aficionados of the telegraph emphasizes both the immediacy and intimacy of the information available; materialized thoughts transmitted "in advance of time" promised a new kind of relationship between the periodicals reader and the printed text, one increasingly built upon the advertised personalities behind the "literally material[ized] thoughts." As scholars like Jeffrey D. Groves and David M. Henkin have observed, national and international news found its way

Winship observes, expanding networks for the distribution of information, texts, and credit were all instrumental in fostering extant reading communities and generating new and diverse audiences for printed materials. New technologies of distribution gave rise to a slew of new innovations that facilitated the transfer of goods and payment between publishers, agents, bookshops, and direct consumers. See Michael Winship, "Distribution and Trade" in *A History of the Book in America* v. 3, 120.

¹⁷ Zboray 79.

¹⁸ Zboray 79, 77.

into local news markets courtesy of the telegraph lines, and as such, did much to contribute to the broadening parameters of individual and community identity.¹⁹

Industrialism, especially the expansion of the print public sphere, brought about significant changes in what historian Richard R. John terms the “information infrastructure” of the period and triggered a move toward what Zboray describes as “a more homogenous national culture.”²⁰ The potential for print-engineered “national culture” is notably postulated by Jurgen Habermas in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, wherein he argues that the print public sphere functioned as a corollary to extant familial and political “spheres” of action and emotion. According to Habermas, while the print public sphere enabled dialogues, debates, and fantasies about national identity, this rising power soon began both to influence conceptions (and constructions) of privacy, domesticity, and family and to be corrupted by political party influences.²¹ Yet the rise of the Industrial Book fundamentally altered Habermas’ idealized “culture-debating” print public sphere of the eighteenth century; the culture of celebrity catapulted public personalities and their affective pull to the frontlines of the mass media marketplace. According to Habermas, a nineteenth-century fragmented mass media marketplace, privatized and profit driven, bypassed the prior century’s localized print public sphere.

¹⁹ Jeffrey D. Groves, “Newspapers and the National Public Sphere,” *A History of the Book in America: The Industrial Book 1840-1880*, v. 3, 239-241; Henkin explains how the telegraph provided “a sense of instantaneous connection” when results of an 1849 boxing match in Maryland were made instantly available to people gathered in bars and newspaper offices in urban areas (23).

²⁰ Richard R. John, “Recasting the Information Infrastructure for the Industrial Age,” *A Nation Transformed by Information*, eds. Alfred D. Chandler Jr. and James W. Cortada (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000). Terence Whalen also considers the impact of the expanding information infrastructure in the antebellum period. He argues that information-related trades and industries grew more rapidly than any other sector between 1800 and the present (76). See Terence Whalen, *Edgar Allan Poe and the Masses: The Political Economy of Literature in Antebellum America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999); see also Zboray xvi.

²¹ Jurgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger and Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1991).

This emerging mass culture opened up reading spaces and opportunities to increasingly diverse audiences, enabling innovative editors and literary celebrities to reach a record number of American readers. Efficient production and distribution networks created new and socio-economically diverse reading communities, composed of what Nina Baym terms the “newly literate masses.” As scholars like Patricia Cline Cohen, David Reynolds, and Timothy Gilfoyle have argued, increased availability of affordable printed materials like penny papers, paperbound novels, and broadsheets generated new reading communities, facilitated upward class mobility, and fueled interest in scandal and celebrity through gossip reports and sensational reporting.²² Not all publishing ventures were aimed at an increasingly enfranchised working class reader, however. Willis’ *Evening Mirror*, for example, launched from the ashes of the *New York Mirror* in 1844, was a mouthpiece for his overtures to both an urban, social elite and those interested in reading gossip about the influential upper crust. The *Evening Mirror* featured articles on current fashions, literary reviews, Willis’ popular editorial column, and a significant amount of literary and social gossip. Marketed to New York’s standard bearers of refined culture, the magazine was part of the same print culture expansion that resulted in record-breaking subscription numbers for mass-market magazines like *Graham’s* and the *New York Ledger*.

Cultural institutions like the lyceum lecture circuit presented alternative methods for diverse audiences to come into contact with authors and texts.²³ It is no accident that the lyceum speaking circuit blossomed during this period of print media expansion and accompanying mass

²² Baym 28-29. Patricia Cline Cohen, Timothy J. Gilfoyle, and Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz, *The Flash Press: Sporting Male Weeklies in 1840s New York* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2008); David Reynolds, *Beneath the American Renaissance: The Subversive Imagination in the Age of Emerson and Melville* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1988).

²³ Public circulating libraries also expanded readers’ exposure to texts and authors. The struggle to stay viable and increase collections forced many public and social libraries to open their doors to women; moreover, some of the more successful libraries included reading rooms that featured popular periodicals, again widening the public’s access to a larger variety of printed materials. See Kenneth E. Carpenter, “Libraries,” *A History of the Book in America*, v. 3., 303-311.

culture in the United States. Between the 1840s and 1850s, nearly 4000 towns were exposed to the tableau of public personalities exhibited on the Lyceum circuit. Begun in 1824 by Josiah Holbrook, the American Lyceum was intended to advance, as Holbrook phrased, “the universal diffusion of knowledge.” The lyceum lecture was a transitional practice that relied on a community based oral tradition while also educating audiences in national tastes and conventions. The lecture circuit also created an additional system through which celebrities could be “distributed” to audiences. Popular authors, ministers, and intellectuals traveled the circuit performing well-known pieces, market testing new works before publication, and building their name recognition with future book or periodical purchasers. Ralph Waldo Emerson, for example, spent from four to six months each year on the lyceum circuit; his 1845 series on the “Uses of Great Men,” later published as *Representative Men*, was a catalyst for his increased lecturing schedule, but as Emerson biographer Robert D. Richardson notes, Emerson had been traveling on the lecture circuit since 1833.²⁴ Drawing on his lectures at the Concord School of Philosophy, Bronson Alcott began a series of lectures that took him through the countryside of Ohio in an effort to stabilize the Alcott family’s perennially shaky finances; after the success of *Little Women* made his daughter a celebrity, Bronson Alcott was billed as the “Father of the Little Women” on lecture advertisements.

Traveling lecture series made it possible for a diverse and expanding readership to come into contact with many of the literary celebrities of the period; yet the vast majority of readers relied on printed texts to sustain their relationships with authors. The rapid growth of the antebellum periodicals market was perhaps the most significant factor in the development of a mass culture in the United States, as scholars like Terence Whalen, Jonathan Elmer, Susan

²⁴ See Robert D. Richardson, *Emerson: The Mind on Fire* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1995) 418-422; also Zboray 107-108; Carl Bode, *American Lyceum: Town Meeting of the Mind* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1956).

Belasco, and Kenneth Price have argued. Whalen argues, for example, that Edgar Allan Poe's literary criticism of the late 1830s was preoccupied with how to evaluate what he described as the "new supply of literary commodities"; Poe was concerned not only with how this surge in periodical publication would affect American literary culture, but also with his own economic reliance on a popular audience whom he occasionally characterized as a "mob of readers."²⁵ Bluford Adams describes a similar anxiety on the part of the Young American literary elite who were concerned about the effect of mass media and its prophets, most notably P.T. Barnum, on the development and reception of a much heralded "American Shakespeare."²⁶ Notably, it was not only nationally circulating magazines like *Graham's* or the *Saturday Evening Post* that constructed this kind of "homogenous" national print identity. Urban sporting and political papers in the 1840s and early 1850s like the *Broadway Belle* and the *Whip*, under the auspices of the larger-than-life editor, author, and scandal-magnet George Thompson, featured local news and gossip that had the effect of shrinking the imagined reading community while simultaneously making conscious overtures to mass media conventions, especially in the characterization of their audience. As Michael Millner has argued, these specialized, urban magazines and newspapers "project a sense of readership that seems fairly local but also a readership of strangers [that is] in that sense 'mass.' The sporting papers often seem to be trying

²⁵ Whalen argues that Poe's opinions about readers were strongly impacted by the Panic of 1837, causing him to replace his earlier "aesthetic of pleasure" with a "utilitarian concept of truth" (85). Poe's later criticism at times referred to the "mob of readers" created by the influx of literary commodities (82). Whalen argues that Poe's remarks about "mob literature" reveal his anxiety about his economic reliance on a popular audience. In other words, his position as a genius (which he characterized as an "impoverished outcast") was threatened by his reliance on a popular audience for validation. Poe noted that "humbler talents" should write for popular audiences, such as "N.P. Willis who was well-constituted for dazzling the masses" (89). See Whalen 76-89. See also Kenneth Price and Susan Belasco Smith, "Introduction: Periodical Literature in Social and Historical Context," *Periodical Literature in Nineteenth-Century America*, eds., Price and Belasco Smith (Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia, 1995); Jonathan Elmer, *Reading at the Social Limit: affect, mass culture, and Edgar Allan Poe* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995).

²⁶ Bluford Adams, *E Pluribus Barnum: The Great Showman and the Making of U.S. Popular Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997) 17-21.

to mediate between anonymous urban readers, and in this way they aspire to be mass.”²⁷ Large circulation numbers, rapid production rates, and the episodic nature of the reading experience placed magazines and newspapers at the vanguard of American cultural institutions that shaped mass culture in the United States. As the editor of the *Museum of Foreign Literature, Science, and Art* observed in 1833: “[p]eriodicals go on increasing...and learning and genius are largely employed just now in the daily, weekly, and monthly publications.”²⁸ The late 1830s and 1840s ushered in what one journalist described as “the Golden Age of periodicals” in the United States, a period in which rising circulation numbers, increased distribution potential, and improved production quality generated an unprecedented boom in magazine publication.²⁹ During this “golden age,” overall periodical publication rose six-fold, from less than 100 periodicals in 1825 to over 600 in 1850.³⁰ While the average print run of a book was between 500-1000 in the 1840s, *Graham’s* magazine boasted circulation numbers of 40,000 in 1841; *Godey’s Lady’s Book* reached over 70,000 readers in 1851 and the *New York Ledger* had an astounding readership of 400,000 in 1860.³¹

Mass market magazines like *The Saturday Evening Post*, the *Knickerbocker*, *Graham’s*, and *Godey’s Lady’s Book* generated a new kind of national literary celebrity. National magazines published and reviewed original American works in an effort to distance themselves from a

²⁷ Michael Millner, “Circulating Scandal in Antebellum Periodicals: Panel Response” (American Studies Association, October 2008, Albuquerque, NM).

²⁸ “Gossip on Literature,” *The Museum of Foreign Literature, Science, and Art* 2 (May 1833): 131.

²⁹ Quoted in Frank Luther Mott, *A History of American Magazines, 1741-1850*, v.1 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1939) 341.

³⁰ Mott 342.

³¹ Susan Barrera Fay, “A Modest Celebrity: Literary reputation and the marketplace in antebellum America,” Dissertation, George Washington University (DC), January 1992, 220-221. Gift book circulation was often much higher; Fay cites popular gift books like the *Atlantic Souvenir* as having circulation numbers between 2000 and 10,000 per year. However, since the contents were usually published anonymously, gift books, despite larger circulations, were not as instrumental in publicizing celebrities, although the practice of referring to past publications did generate some form of reputation.

morass of uninspired reproductions of British periodicals. Unlike Washington Irving, whose early success in the United States is often attributed to his successful performance in British and European markets, the next generation of literary celebrity found fame in the pages of nationally circulating periodicals.³² Enterprising editors like George Graham were quick to realize the value of recognizable, regular contributors, and they advertised their connections with authors heavily in their magazines; Graham, for example, was the first American publisher to feature contributors' names on the cover of *Graham's* magazine. By creating national markets for authors' works and capitalizing on their print "presence" in their publications, magazine editors were some of the first arbiters of national taste to recognize the value (for both publisher and author) of literary celebrity. Highly touted "stables" of authors like those Graham featured prominently on the cover of his magazine gained name recognition and regular audiences through their steady publication in popular, national magazines. Authors like Lydia Sigourney, T.S. Arthur, Eliza Leslie, Nathaniel Parker Willis, and Edgar Allan Poe were part of a large class of editor-authors who shaped the editorial and creative content of publications, many of which they co-owned or co-founded. Indeed, many aspiring authors came to view magazine publication as an essential step in their pursuit of literary success. As Susan Barrera Fay argues, "[m]agazines offered writers access both to an audience and to the interlocking promotional machinery of the industry, and few writers could afford to bypass this route."³³

Perhaps no nineteenth-century American is more notable for his mastery of the "interlocking promotional machinery of the [publishing] industry" than P.T. Barnum, recognized today, as he was by his contemporaries, for his cultivation of celebrity,

³² Burstein 152-154.

³³ Fay 219.

manipulation of public sentiment, and astounding transformation of publicity practices in the United States. Leo Braudy asserts that Barnum's own status as a public figure illustrates an "elaborate sense of being in public" that was increasingly familiar to antebellum Americans, both private individuals and public figures.³⁴ Braudy's description of "being in public" emphasizes not simply the fact of public recognition, but also the ontological state of existence in a public sphere. Barnum biographer Neil Harris similarly characterizes Barnum as a man who "lived his life in public"; as a model of public living, Barnum's own well-publicized life, in addition to his publicity creations like Tom Thumb and Jenny Lind, introduced antebellum audiences to a new kind of "public being" that would come to be expected of celebrities. Braudy, Adams, Jennifer Wicke and others emphasize Barnum's playful relationship with the audiences he conned in his publicity of *Struggles and Triumphs*, attractions at the American Museum, the phenomenal tours of Jenny Lind and Tom Thumb, and the fantastical exploitation of the Feejee mermaid and Joice Heth. Barnum's success was due in no small part to his own ironic understanding of what we might now call truth in advertising. While Barnum had no qualms about using exaggeration or outright invention in his publicity for various projects, he was keenly aware of the audience's desire to be let in on the "truth" behind his bombastic claims. As Braudy observes, "Barnum not only revealed his tricks, but also made the audience love it and come back for more—because they had been given the privilege of being let in on the processes by which the illusion of reality had been created. He put his audience on their mettle as people of sophistication and insight into what was true and what wasn't—and charged them admission for the chance to prove it."³⁵ Far from being annoyed by Barnum's dupe, audiences well versed in Barnum's

³⁴ Leo Braudy, *The Frenzy of Renown: Fame and its History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986) 499.

³⁵ Braudy 501.

prevarications enjoyed what Wicke calls the “deeply satisfying...hermeneutic procedure” of deception, as the master of manipulation pulled aside the curtain to reveal his trick.

Attractions like the Feejee mermaid and Joice Heth were intended to unsettle audiences, causing them to question both their authenticity and that of the “spectacular halo that Barnum’s ad network was able to call into being.”³⁶

Yet Barnum’s impact on the culture of celebrity extends far beyond any single exhibit or exploit in his long career; rather, Barnum’s imaginative publicity and ability to harness the power of the mass media were characteristics of what nineteenth-century Americans began to term “Barnumization,” a process wherein individual identity was subsumed into a public persona, courtesy of mass media exposure and the “spectacular halo” of publicity. Not only did he “Barnumize” himself and his attractions, his skillful deceptions trained audiences to question the illusions he marketed to them, to peer behind the curtain of mass media representation. In a sense, Barnumization conditioned popular audiences to expect layers of authenticity and deceit in public entertainments, whether in the deconstruction of a ragged, piecemeal mermaid or Heth’s representation as George Washington’s nursery maid. Mid-century readers were likewise interested in “uncovering” or “unmasking” the authentic personalities of the authors they came to know by reading their printed works. Wicke argues that Barnum’s mastery of the media gave him a privileged vantage point from which to study the changes wrought by the print public sphere and the resulting possibilities for exploitation: “Barnum, as the author of a discursive practice, had discovered a blank scrim within modern culture—an empty cultural space—poised in front

³⁶ Jennifer Wicke, *Advertising Fictions: Literature, Advertisement, and Social Reading* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988) 62, 70. Wicke observes that Barnum’s interest in his own ability to “Barnumize” is evident in his autobiography, *Struggles and Triumphs*; she describes Barnum’s account of General Tom Thumb’s return home: “when [Barnum] takes the young boy he had promoted as General Tom Thumb back to his country town to visit his parents, one of the townsfolk tells Barnum, ‘We never thought Charlie much of a phenomenon when he lived among us, but now that he has become “Barnumized,” he is a rare curiosity!’” (69).

of what his advertising had taught him was now a mass *public*. ‘I work for the millions, and they give me millions.’ This blank space concretized public, mass discourse...”³⁷ Barnum sought to fill the “empty cultural space” coursing at the feet of a burgeoning mass public with spectacles and humbuggery; enterprising editors in the mid-nineteenth century turned to gossip and regular contributors. Yet in each case, public personalities were thrust into the alleged “blank scrim” of mass culture. This new class of celebrities were expected to both “be in public” and, in effect, to become “public beings.” Thanks in part to Barnum’s profitable play with authenticity, celebrities, themselves amalgamations of fiction and reality, became personal points of emotional contact in an increasingly anonymous mass media market.

Celebrities in a variety of fields had the potential to be influential, inspiring, and troubling to the audiences they courted. Recent scholarly works on Willis, Barnum, Whitman, Longfellow, and Adah Isaacs Mencken have drawn upon the individual lives of famous Americans to craft narratives about the ways in which these poets, actors, editors, and cultural impresarios thrived as public personalities and were often consumed by the celebrity culture they helped to strengthen in the mid-nineteenth century.³⁸ Indeed, studying these impressive characters at the mercy of the fickle mistress of celebrity makes for great

³⁷ Wicke 70.

³⁸ By necessity, these works are focused on singular authors and largely make specific claims about how different celebrities were created and transformed by the changing world of publicity and public personality that came to be demanded of nineteenth-century American authors and performers. See Blake, *Walt Whitman and the Culture of American Celebrity*; Baker, *Sentiment and Celebrity: Nathaniel Parker Willis and the Trials of Literary Fame*; Adams, *E Pluribus Barnum: The Great Showman and the Making of U.S. Popular Culture*; Christoph Irmscher, *Longfellow Redux* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006); Renee Sentilles, *Performing Mencken: Adah Isaacs Mencken and the birth of American celebrity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Patricia Okker, *Our Sister Editors: Sarah J. Hale and the Tradition of Nineteenth-Century American Women Editors* (Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press, 1995). Still other critics explore niche markets of the print world like urban salon culture or the African American world of print in order to shed light on how these smaller coteries reflect upon larger trends. See Eliza Richards’ discussion of salon culture in *Gender and the Poetics of Reception in Poe's Circle* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004); see also Jeannine Marie DeLombard, “African American Cultures of Print,” *A History of the Book in America*, v3 360-373.

storytelling; nearly all of those who sought fame and recognition like Fern, Whitman, Poe, Melville, Willis, and many others felt the backlash of the celebrity status they so actively sought. Critics like Roach have argued that the celebrity functioned as a disciplining force for an increasingly mass-mediated society; audiences could project desires for fame, wealth, success, and passion onto these publicly traded personalities and then relish their inevitable, and very public, disgrace. Audiences understood these public figures as new iterations of morality plays, writ large across a stimulated national conscience adept at moralizing about the rise and fall of public individuals. To an extent, this argument holds water; lessons learned, ambitions curbed, and contrition expressed continue to be staples of the celebrity narrative.

Yet framing the study of celebrity culture only as a vehicle through which to ascertain shared notions of virtue and vice overlooks several points of cultural significance, not least of which are the very real, emotional bonds mid-nineteenth-century Americans professed to have with celebrities. Studying the antebellum culture of celebrity facilitates the exploration of a larger set of issues: class antagonisms, the tension between popular culture forms and the pursuit of “high art,” the problem of authenticity in public representation, the developing practice of publicity and advertising, and changing possibilities for interaction between media institutions, celebrities, and mass mediated audiences. The latter, especially, has the potential to shed light on the perennially difficult study of reader response in the period. Celebrities were invested (often by both themselves and others) with malleable characteristics and personalities that were capacious enough to inspire national responses, but specific enough to adhere to distinct individuals; Fern’s characterization of herself as “a little Bunker Hill,” for example, draws on a nationally recognized symbol to invest her own

symbolic public persona with characteristics of determination and stalwart individualism.³⁹

The mediated nature of literary celebrity, filtered to readers through periodicals, editorial puffs, advertisements, and gossip columns, was transparent in that there was no attempt to hide the celebrity's value as a packaged production available for consumption. Yet this transparency was tempered by the familiarity of the literary celebrity's identifiable persona and the way in which literary celebrities did in fact "speak" to their audiences directly through the printed word. While clearly a mediated relationship—that of reader and author and text—the identifiable celebrity, along with their developed style and persona, inspired responses to both texts and authors that were personal and emotionally charged.

That the expanding antebellum world of print facilitated public celebrity, few would deny; indeed, authors were adapting, with varying degrees of skill, to the marketing techniques of editors and publishers. Some, like Willis, were quick to realize the potential power of celebrity status. Willis unapologetically sought notoriety for himself; writing to his mother in 1844, he noted: "My reputation keeps widening and seems to go on, without coaxing, rapidly. You will live to see me a celebrity yet."⁴⁰ Others, like editor and author Cornelius Mathews, grumbled about the publicity efforts driving national periodicals like *Graham's* and *Godey's Lady's Book*. Meanwhile, most public and private individuals were beginning to question what larger function, if any, the celebrity had in American democracy and culture. Characterized both as the apotheosis of republican civic virtue and a threat to cultural sophistication at the hands of an ignorant mass mediated audience, the celebrity was a lightning rod for debates about influence and cultural capital, and in a larger sense, about

³⁹ Fanny Fern, "A Little Bunker Hill," *Fanny Fern: A Memorial Volume* ed. James Parton (New York: G.W. Carleton & Co., 1873). Fern's subject in the column was equal rights for women, and she famously advised her female readers to "Make your reins out of silk...and drive where you like!"

⁴⁰ Letter from N.P. Willis to Hannah Willis, 20 Jan. 1844. Quoted in Baker 88.

the roles individuals played in an increasingly impersonal mass media marketplace. Willis entered this discussion in dramatic fashion, for example, attributing a significant role to the emerging class of celebrity in which he became a figurehead, a cautionary tale, and a perennial source of controversy. In his editorial capacity at the *New York Mirror*, Willis named the American celebrity as the ideal tastemaker and cultural gatekeeper for a rapidly expanding nation that many believed to be endangered by the same print public sphere that encouraged interest in the lives, publications, and performances of famous strangers. In an effort to halt the accelerating “demoralization of private life,” Willis delivered his famous lecture on “Fashion” at the Broadway Tabernacle in June 1844. Willis stridently challenged the fashionable, social elite, whom he referred to as the “Upper Ten Thousand,” to influence and regulate their contemporaries. He warned that the actions of “the vicious, the wilful [sic], the ignorant and shortsighted,” the fodder of the popular penny press, could potentially stifle the creation of what Baker describes as “a new republican aristocracy from the ranks of celebrity.” Willis believed that those distinguished by talent, intellect, and social sophistication, rather than wealth or family heritage, should lead the “Upper Ten Thousand”; those individuals, while not all nationally recognized as celebrities, would impact local circles and, in turn, radiate their influence outward to persons and communities beyond the sprawling urban center. While affirming a natural right of influence for his so-called “upper ten,” Willis was also concerned with crushing the legitimacy of the “vicious” and “ignorant” individuals whose example it would be disastrous to follow. To Willis, newspapers, magazines, and penny papers were fast gaining the ability to shape public opinion around figureheads of influence; he urged his audiences that there was little time to

waste in deciding “from what quarry [cultural influence] shall be hewn, and to what mortar of public sentiment it shall owe its stability!”⁴¹

Willis’ Tabernacle address was a product of growing concerns about the role of popular opinion in shaping cultural power structures and institutions. His Upper Ten, as Blake has argued, “was basically a form of education and social control” descended from Thomas Jefferson’s theory of a natural aristocracy.⁴² Willis’ plan to trade upon celebrity recognition to engender a new, elite class of cultural gatekeeper raises several interesting questions about social and economic mobility in the antebellum period, but perhaps most interesting is Willis’ appropriation of a relatively new phenomenon—the national celebrity figure—to serve as the model of democratic cultural value. His claims for the power of the celebrity in the antebellum period help to illuminate the influence that this new cultural elite had upon an expanding nation of readers. He was not alone in his call for a new aristocracy of fashion and taste; coverage in Horace Greeley’s *Tribune* responded favorably to Willis’ proposal, praising his “leading idea of refining and exalting fashion into a power—the talisman of a self-sustaining, unprivileged Aristocracy, which shall furnish a counter-poise and barrier against the tyranny of Public Opinion.”⁴³

By positioning the “tyranny of Public Opinion” against the “talisman” of a cultural aristocracy, the anonymous reporter outlined two divergent theories concerning the mounting influence of the celebrity in antebellum culture. On the one hand, celebrities had

⁴¹ Baker 89; quoted in Baker 99.

⁴² Blake 55-56. Baker also discusses the links between Willis’ fashionable upper caste and Jefferson’s notion of natural aristocracy: “ever since the collapse of Federalist social and political hegemony early in the century, critics had bemoaned American society’s headlong and rudderless quality...in these days of commercial expansion and ballyhoo politics, the question of what cultural criteria the nation was to steer by and who was to represent these republican standards figured as a perennial source of anxiety and controversy” 89, 97-100.

⁴³ Quoted in Baker 101.

the potential to be a positive force of democratic influence, “human texts” that could be read by the masses and used to instruct and uplift. Yet while Willis was propounding his theory of social influence, many other contemporary Americans were beginning to consider the celebrity as an untoward *product* of public interest, rather than a shaper of civic virtue or personal taste. As Blake argues, “celebrity, with all its surrounding commotion and hype, was democracy’s ironic cousin, a system of value that did not measure virtue or talent as much as an individual’s cultural profile.”⁴⁴ Stripped of any pretense, antebellum celebrity value resided in the “cultural profile,” independent of the actions, whether graceful or tawdry, that earned it. In this sense, celebrities acted as mirrors for public interest, rather than models of taste, as Blake reflects:

Celebrities emerged [in the antebellum period] as a new and rather effective means for representing the public to itself. Though antebellum Americans were inclined to see in the famous an expression of exalted individualism, the public’s construction and use of celebrities gave them a function analogous to the sermons, editorials, and advertisements the culture used to know itself...In fact, as both a human text and a form of media, the celebrity provided a figure of public attention that appeared to come from the people while simultaneously being represented before them.⁴⁵

The celebrity is equated to other representational mechanisms like sermons, editorials, and advertisements that reflect, with differing emphases, the social values and preoccupations of their particular historical moment. Yet while similar to the print productions of editorial, advertisement, and sermon, the celebrity was a particularly embodied form of social representation; public personalities were rooted in individual people whose appearances, dress, and behavior were a crucial part of their celebrity status.⁴⁶ As public figures they were

⁴⁴ Blake 49.

⁴⁵ Blake 57.

⁴⁶ Roach proposes an interesting theory about celebrity bodies and their simultaneous strength and vulnerability; the combined action of strength and vulnerability “work[s] cooperatively, like muscles in

expected to represent shared feelings or accomplishments, while also being singled out for display, emulation, and condemnation.

Popular celebrities' representation of the public differed significantly from Ralph Waldo Emerson's discussion of "representative" individuals in his 1845 lecture series, later published as *Representative Men* (1850). Emerson's project was markedly different than the hero worship of his contemporary Thomas Carlyle; instead, he was interested in exploring, as the title of his first lecture indicates, "the uses of great men." Plato, Swedenborg, Montaigne, Shakespeare, Napoleon, and Goethe each embody, as biographer Robert D. Richardson describes, "the full flowering of some one aspect of our common nature." In this way, Emerson's subjects are indeed "representative"; they represent the possibility for excellence shared by all individuals. Yet while Emerson determines "greatness" and "genius" to be common fragments of collective human possibility ("I admire great men of all classes..."), Emerson's pantheon was still composed of individuals whose innate talent, imagination, and insight indelibly marked their lives and distinguished them from their peers. These are clearly inspirational narratives, stories of men who rose to the top, not as Horatio Alger's "ragged Dick" would, with the help of influential friends and an eye for the main chance, but through their self-realization of greatness, a possibility Emerson believed applicable to all.⁴⁷

In contrast to Emerson's ideas about the value of "representative" individuals, "democracy's ironic cousin," the celebrity, is not remembered or valued for one specific

opposable pairs, and their mesmerizing interplay has a long history as well as popular currency as the source of public intimacy" (36).

⁴⁷ Richardson 413-417. Emerson deliberates on the potential for greatness: "When nature removes a great man, people explore the horizon for a successor; but none comes, and none will. His class is extinguished with him. In some other and quite different field, the next man will appear; not Jefferson, not Franklin, but now a great salesman; then a road-contractor; then a student of fishes; then a buffalo-hunting explorer, or a semi-savage western general" (236). Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, v.2 (New York: Bigelow, Smith, and Co., 1926).

intellectual or artistic production; rather, as Richard Scheckel argues, celebrities gain notoriety for living public lives that are “seen as acts of self-creation amplified and distorted by publicity.”⁴⁸ While many literary celebrities certainly did possess talent, this alone was not responsible for their celebrity; rather, notoriety, name recognition, publicity, and scandal rendered these public personalities “representational” figures who mirrored the diversity of human behaviors and emotions, reflections of the public’s speculative gaze. As Jonathan Elmer observes, in Poe’s 1839 story, “The Man That Was Used Up,” the talk of the town, the grotesque, piecemeal General John A.B.C. Smith, is a figure whose “mystery and singularity reside in his very publicity, the abstraction and literalization of the public itself.”⁴⁹ The paradox of celebrity lies in the combined abstraction and literalization of the celebrity identity that Elmer recognizes. Celebrities, as “human texts” and representational figures, were functions both of the people and for the people.

Yet while the celebrity as a category of antebellum personhood was invested with representational standing, the literary celebrity was often endowed with a particular capacity to spark an emotional attachment to both herself and her printed texts. In part, this was due to an increasing awareness of the uses of celebrity on the part of authors, editors, and publishers. Not only were mid-nineteenth century authors increasingly savvy about their own relation to both markets and readers, calling for more protective copyright legislation and demanding and receiving more generous pay, but both authors and editors became more adept at negotiating what Susan Williams describes as the “new social being,” the literary celebrity, “who stood apart from his or her own writing and commanded an audience based

⁴⁸ Scheckel 275.

⁴⁹ Elmer 50. Elmer continues: “When the narrator pulls it all together in the end (as the General’s servant pulls him together), the reader recognizes that what he or she took to be more or less random fragments of discourse in fact form a seamless unity, the perfectly self-referential construction of the public by publicity itself...” (50).

on personal as well as literary interest.”⁵⁰ Yet among expanding readerships, the same expanding print public sphere that made possible national celebrity status also fueled a sense of alienation. As critics like Zboray have argued, printed materials had the ability to act as stop-gap measures that filled an emotional need for an increasingly diffuse and disconnected antebellum society; larger communities of print had to supply affective needs formerly fulfilled locally. During a chaotic period of industrialization in which traditional networks such as the family, church, and local commerce were exposed to the widening purview of national media and mass culture, fictional stories and participation in reading communities offered succor for a rapidly changing social structure. Yet according to Zboray, the comfort offered through reading was bound to fall short: “if community depends upon mutuality of relations, how could the cold, printed word reciprocate the full dimension of human experience invested in it by readers?”⁵¹ However, the notion that printed materials only offered “cold type” to a distressed group of readers overlooks the real affective connection readers developed with the authors they believed they knew through their literary creations. Readers often embodied authors in their texts, referring to Fanny Fern’s weekly column in the *New York Ledger* as her “weekly visit.” Intense professions of affection and curiosity found in fan letters undermine the idea that readers understood printed materials to be simply cold, lifeless, and mechanized. Zboray identifies the supposed absence of reciprocation between readers and authors as evidence against the possibility of affective bonding between the two camps. Yet while printed materials could not sufficiently *replace* individual relationships based on affection and exchange, it is also evident, as the undisciplined responses to authors and texts discussed throughout this project attest, that

⁵⁰ Susan S. Williams, “Authors and Literary Authorship,” *A History of the Book in America*, v.3, 91.

⁵¹ Zboray xvii, 80-81.

novels, magazines, and other printed texts were far more than simply an alluring entertainment, they were sites of intense acts of identification on the part of readers.

Instead of the cold comfort of “cold type,” literary celebrities and their texts offered readers an accessible and appealing representation of interior life. By reading celebrities’ published texts and the “spectacular halo” of publicity that surrounded them, audiences hoped to gain insight into the emotions, tastes, and opinions of authors. As Baym argues, “the move from novel to author was automatic—novels were conceived of as human products created by a familiar person.”⁵² While Baym’s claims are genre specific, her observation points to a larger antebellum trend of reading to “get at the author,” as Barbara Hochman describes.⁵³ Readers’ sense of familiarity with otherwise unknown authors was fueled by publicity tactics that emphasized authorial identity and personality in advertisements, magazines, and celebrity “spin-off” products such as a Fanny Fern perfume and autographed cartes de visite photographs of celebrity authors. As literary celebrities became commodities, individual personalities became part of a larger marketing machine. Clearly, these manufactured authorial personas were largely constructed by editors, publicists, and authors themselves; James T. Fields’ prodigious management of Nathaniel Hawthorne’s career is a well-known example of such marketing savvy.⁵⁴ Yet in an

⁵² Baym 250.

⁵³ Barbara Hochman, *Getting at the Author: Reimagining Books and Reading in the Age of American Realism* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2001). While Hochman presents a valuable contrast between mid-century readers and those immersed in the realist fiction of the late nineteenth-century, at times the argument oversimplifies antebellum readers’ emotional connections to authors (deeming them largely illegitimate). Moreover, the argument fails to contextualize the ways in which publicity and advertising popularized ideas of authorial authenticity and interiority. Instead, the argument presents earlier readers as naïvely equating authors with their characters and narrators without examining the cultural and market forces that encouraged them to “read into” texts.

⁵⁴ See Richard Brodhead’s “Manufacturing You Into a Personage: Hawthorne, the Canon, and the Institutionalization of American Literature,” *The School of Hawthorne* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986) 48-66. Charvat reflects on the rapidly changing publicity industry in the antebellum period: “publicity for

increasingly fragmented print public sphere, these constructed identities promised the possibility of emotional connection. The public interiority offered by celebrity authors was a jumble of authenticity and carefully constructed fiction. Although a newspaper columnist like Fern allegedly volunteered personal information about her family life and habits more readily than a poet like Longfellow, she labored to project a stylized and at times hyper-feminized image in publicity materials and direct communications with readers. As scholars like Christopher Castiglia and Julia Stern have argued, teasing the threads of public expression, personal writing, dress, and manners together to create a more complete understanding of the emotional and creative lives of antebellum Americans is fraught with many difficulties, the foremost of which is access: “the interior is not transparent, but is a construction that must be reached through the mediation of language and representation.”⁵⁵ Yet while scholarly attempts to reconstruct authentic interiors are vexed, antebellum Americans faced similar barriers when they attempted to bypass the stark “cold type” of the printed text to uncover a “real” authorial interior.

Reviewers often modeled this behavior for readers. In a review of Susan Warner’s *Queechy*, an anonymous reviewer asserts that “the author’s mind is an eminently healthy one,” confidently passing judgment on the authors’ psychological state after reading her printed text. In an effort to encourage critical reading practices, reviewers often suggested multiple readings of texts, fostering a practice of “living” with a text and getting to know its author

authors and books was either nonexistent or extremely primitive in 1820” (39). Winship also notes that publishers became more actively involved in publicizing their authors with the advent of cloth bindings that allowed publishers to create a market identity both for themselves and for their authors: “for the first time, publishers were responsible not only for the typography and appearance of [texts], but also for the design and productions of the binding in which they were sold to the public...publishers and readers were connected in a new way” (59-60).

⁵⁵ Christopher Castiglia and Julia Stern, “Introduction to Special Issue: Interiority in Early American Literature,” *Early American Literature* 37:1 (2002): 1-8. See also Castiglia, “Abolition’s Racial Interiors and the Making of White Civic Depth,” *American Literary History* 14.1 (2002): 32-59.

and main characters.⁵⁶ Reviewers also made use of the increased availability of authors' collected works by constructing "authorial stories" based on their familiarity with the authors' oeuvre. As the tenor and scope of Melville's works changed, for example, reviewers characterized his authorial story as "incoherent."⁵⁷ Like reviewers, antebellum literary critics often encouraged readers to search for authorial characteristics through the act of reading. Poe's popular exercises in handwriting analysis were predicated on the idea that information about literary celebrities was hidden in their autographs. His popular series in both the *Southern Literary Messenger* (1836) and *Graham's* (1841), demonstrated how the artifacts of celebrity (images, signatures, texts) could be probed through careful reading and analysis. While readers may not have replicated his methodology, his work, including the later "Literati of New York City," encouraged speculation about how authors behaved in the privileged inner sanctum of the New York literary salon.

Whether inspired by reviewers' methods or their own pursuit of authorial interiority, mid-century audiences shared a belief that reading engendered relationships between authors and readers. Readers wrote to authors like Longfellow and Fern presuming upon an intimacy they already felt through the act of reading. Fern cited some of her readers' speculations about her physical appearance in her column, "Some Gossip about Myself": "A correspondent inquires how I look? Am I tall? Have I dark, or light complexion? And what color are my eyes?"⁵⁸ As Poe acknowledged in the November 1841 introduction to "Autography," readers' longing for celebrities' bodies, images, and autographs speaks to their

⁵⁶ Baym 142 (*Queechy*), 61-62.

⁵⁷ Baym 251. Reviewers' interest in an authors' catalogue of literary production was likely not an entirely new innovation; however, the ability to access authors' past works was greatly improved with the advent of stereotype sheets and other technologies that made reprinting additional editions cost effective.

⁵⁸ Fanny Fern, *Ginger-Snaps* (New York: Carleton, Publishers, 1870) 185.

desire to access the interior lives of those they are acquainted with through print: “Next to the person of a distinguished man-of-letters, we desire to see his portrait—next to his portrait, his autograph.”⁵⁹ Curiosity about authors’ physical appearances was, in part, what spurred influential magazine editors George Graham and Louis Godey to begin two popular series, “Our Contributors” (*Graham’s*) and “Godey’s Portrait Gallery,” which featured engraved images of authors and were accompanied by effusive biographies penned by their literary peers. Printed images act as material, mediating sites for interaction between celebrity and audience, public personae and private readers. Features like “Our Contributors,” and “Godey’s Portrait Gallery” transformed authors and their private lives into popular magazine content, an uncomfortable shift for authors like Longfellow, who indignantly complained that his engraved portrait in the *Graham’s*’ “Our Contributors” series made him look like a “a very vulgar individual, looking very drunk and very cunning.”⁶⁰

While the bulk of reader responses to literary celebrities were in the form of fan letters or published tributes, an increasing number initiated personal contact with public figures by visiting their homes, a phenomenon discussed in part two of the project. Ernest Longfellow, son of America’s most famous mid-century poet, recorded one such incident from his youth in his memoir, *Random Memories*. In 1853, a disheveled woman appeared on the front doorstep of Craigie House, Longfellow’s famous home, emphatically asserting that she was the poet’s wife. With bags in tow, the woman demanded entrance to the house, intent on claiming possession of both her home and her alleged husband. After repeated attempts to reason with the interloper, Longfellow was forced to call for police assistance to remove her from his home. The anonymous woman’s assumption of intimacy and

⁵⁹ Edgar Allan Poe, “Autography,” *Graham’s* 19.5 (Nov. 1841): 224-225.

⁶⁰ Longfellow’s portrait was featured in the May 1843 edition. Quoted in Fay 233.

familiarity with one of the most recognized literary celebrities of the day, while unusual in its intensity, was certainly not an isolated incident. Enthusiastic readers were eager to meet the man they felt they knew through his works, as one fan wrote to Longfellow, “I address you as a friend—since your works have proven you friend to the world.”⁶¹ While it is impossible to know the precise motivation for the anonymous woman’s startling appearance at Craigie House, the incident can be understood as a more intensified iteration of reader response; likely she was responding to the sense of familiarity claimed by the reader in his letter to Longfellow, although in this case, the fantasy of friendship through print turned into a full-blown delusion of marital intimacy.

Expectations for intimate exchange, coupled with escalating publicity and publication measures, compelled authors to relate to audiences in new and uncomfortable ways. Hawthorne reflected on the increased pressure authors faced to be present and available to readers in his introduction to *Mosses from an Old Manse*: “So far as I am a man of really individual attributes, I veil my face; nor am I, nor have I ever been, one of those supremely hospitable people, who serve up their own hearts delicately fried, with brain-sauce, as a tidbit for their beloved public.”⁶² Of course, when he published *Mosses from an Old Manse*, Hawthorne was not yet a celebrity; nevertheless, his perceptive commentary about changing author-editor-reader relationships are echoed in comments by Longfellow, Poe, Alcott, and many others. Authorial anxiety about readers’ expectations for intimacy was frequently represented in grotesque descriptions of corporeality in print, such as Hawthorne’s “fried hearts” and “brain-sauce.” As editors and publishers worked to transform authors into consumable personas, many mid-century authors described the danger of unlimited exposure and manipulation in these unsettling depictions of

⁶¹ Quoted in Irmscher 32-33.

⁶² Nathaniel Hawthorne, *Mosses from an Old Manse* (New York: Wiley and Putnam, 1846) 29.

dissected or transparent bodies, a topic discussed at length in chapter two. The revolution of the print public sphere enabled a new if not paradoxical possibility for intimacy in print, which obliged literary celebrities to fiercely guard their privacy during the period in which they became most remote from their reading publics.

Yet the study of the emerging culture of celebrity in the United States also reveals much about the possibilities for and limitations of authenticity in a mass-mediated society. Perhaps, in their capacity as spokespersons for an increasingly anonymous mass media, celebrities were models for how individuals could relate to the changing possibilities of industrialized mass communication. The promise of celebrity interiority encouraged readers to respond emotionally to famous strangers, a practice that continued to be demanded of audiences throughout the century, as readers were asked to trust in communities and ideas that were otherwise invisible, masked behind the anonymity of a national press, swelling population, and expanding borders.

In addition to this introductory chapter, the dissertation is composed of five chapters and an epilogue. The first two chapters are focused specifically on the rapid development of the periodicals market in the antebellum period and the effects this transformative market had on American literary celebrity. In Chapter One “Literary Celebrities and the Golden Age of Periodicals,” I argue that the expanding periodical press of the 1830s and 1840s directly impacted both the cultivation of literary celebrity and the rapid growth of the reading public during what one contemporary antebellum editor described as the “golden age” of American periodicals. Changing editorial practices that encouraged the advertisement of authors’ names, images, signatures, and personal lives in popular periodicals disseminated fragments of authorial identity to readers eager to learn more about the personal lives of contributors. I analyze the ways in which editors at *Graham’s* magazine and *Godey’s Lady’s Book* pioneered new publicity

tactics and policies that transformed successful authors into national literary celebrities. George Graham's "sliding scale" of payment, for example, based rates of pay on an author's renown, thereby radically altering how editors and publishers valued both authors and their works. While knitting together disparate geographic and economic audiences through shared reading experiences, *Graham's* and *Godey's* were important platforms for an emerging form of American literary celebrity; like a small handful of their competitors, both magazines rejected the practice of reprinting, going so far as to copyright their contents in the mid-1840s in order to protect themselves and their contributors.

Chapter Two, "'The Identity of Paper and Ink': Poe, 'Autography,' and Celebrity," analyzes Poe's use of handwriting analysis in the "gossiping observations" published about his literary peers in the "Autography" series. Featured in *Graham's* between 1841-42, "Autography" was composed of over 100 woodcut engravings of celebrity authors' autographs and Poe's critical commentary about the aesthetic sensibilities and literary merit of his contemporaries. Poe draws upon the popular antebellum practice of graphology, or handwriting analysis, to structure and support his opinions, but his unique focus on literary figures transforms this popular exercise into a provocative exploration of the emerging culture of celebrity in the United States and the problem of authenticity raised by the burgeoning mass media. I analyze Poe's ambiguous authenticity in the "Autography" series, as well as his use of "literary gossip" for critical purposes. Additionally, I close with an analysis of the popular antebellum practice of autograph collection in order to probe the underlying assumptions of both analysis and collection: that a writer's character is discernible to analysts and therefore accessible to interested readers and collectors.

The final three chapters shift away from an exclusive focus on periodicals and instead study both authors' and readers' responses to the increasing demands of literary celebrity.

Chapter Three, “Writing with Invisible Ink: Hawthorne and his Prefaces,” explores Hawthorne’s use of prefaces to both invite and repel readers’ emotional attachments to his authorial persona. Hawthorne concludes his preface to *Mosses from an Old Manse* (1846), for example, with his condemnation of the “fried hearts” and “brain-sauce” served up by his literary contemporaries. The preface is fraught with contradictions: in it he invites readers for an intimate tour of his home, but insists on donning a veil to cover his “true” self; he scorns celebrities who court the reading public, yet he also covets their attention. Reading his prefaces as spaces of ambivalent self-promotion, I link this genre to the developing trend of illustrated guidebooks to author’s homes popularized in the 1850s. By considering both the preface and the guidebook spatially, the chapter analyzes the process of crafting an authorial persona in the “public interiority” of both a published preface and a published domestic interior.

Chapter Four, “Fanny Fern’s Intimate Readers,” argues that Fern developed a familiar authorial persona that both encouraged readers to regard her as an accessible friend and reinforced her distance from her readers during her twenty-year career writing for periodicals like the *New York Ledger* (1853-1872). The chapter challenges critical responses to Fern that continue to position her as either a victim of her own publicity or a conniving figure who exploited her readers. Instead, I argue for a more nuanced understanding of Fern’s own fraught role in crafting and sustaining an enduring, successful public image.

The final chapter, “Going Beyond the Book: Reader Responses to *Little Women*,” analyzes Alcott’s development of what she termed the “*Little Women* style,” which blurred the boundary between Alcott’s biography and her fictional texts. Alcott’s readers, particularly her adolescent readers, often ignored the distinction between fiction and reality by incorporating her fictional characters and scenarios into their real lives. The “*Little Women* style” profoundly

shaped the terms of Alcott's reception, as popular readers and literary scholars continue to reinforce the conflation of Alcott and Jo March.

Chapter 1

Literary Celebrity in the Golden Age of Periodicals

“Whatever be the merits or demerits, generally, of the Magazine literature of America, there can be no question as to its extent or its influence. The topic—Magazine literature—is therefore an important one...[t]he whole tendency of the age is Magazine-ward.”

-*The Broadway Journal*, March 1, 1845¹

In the January 1844 premiere edition of the *Columbian Lady's and Gentleman's Magazine*, editor John Inman characterized the crucial role that periodicals played in developing literary celebrity: “[Magazines] are the field, chiefly, in which literary reputation is won...[t]he newspaper is too ephemeral—The book not of sufficiently rapid and frequent production. The monthly magazine just hits the happy medium, enabling the writer to present himself twelve times a year before a host of readers, in whose memories he is thus kept fresh.”² Inman’s Goldilocks-inspired logic rejects both the small circulation and plodding production of books as well as the fleeting impact of the newspaper, instead hailing the magazine as the “happy medium” of both substance and style. Inman’s contemporaries in the editorial and authorial corps often commented publicly on the impact of periodicals on a changing American literary culture. As the editor of the *Museum of Foreign Literature, Science, and Art*, observed in 1833: “[p]eriodicals go on increasing...and learning and genius are largely employed just now in the daily, weekly, and monthly publications.”³ The late 1830s and 1840s ushered in what one

¹ Edgar Allan Poe, “Graham’s Magazine,” *Broadway Journal* 3 (Mar. 1845): 139.

² John Inman, “Magazine Literature,” *Columbian Lady's Journal and Gentleman's Magazine* (January 1844): 1-5.

³ “Gossip on Literature,” *The Museum of Foreign Literature, Science, and Art* 22 (May 1833): 131.

journalist described as “the Golden Age of periodicals” in the United States, a period in which rising circulation numbers, increased distribution potential, and improved production quality generated an unprecedented boom in magazine publication.⁴ In her memoir, *Letters of Life*, Lydia Sigourney reflects on this time, noting that “periodical literature flourished abundantly. The monthly magazines in particular became almost legion.”⁵ Mass-market magazines like *Graham’s*, *Godey’s Lady’s Book*, the *Knickerbocker* in the 1840s and *The New York Ledger* and *Harper’s* in the 1850s claimed to represent American taste and speak for and to readers across the nation. As Edgar Allan Poe, new co-editor of *The Broadway Journal*, proclaimed in 1845, “the whole tendency of the age is Magazine-ward.”⁶

This chapter explores the ways in which *Graham’s* and *Godey’s Lady’s Book*, founded in 1840 and 1837 respectively, generated a new form of national literary celebrity in the antebellum period.⁷ *Graham’s* and *Godey’s* were the two blockbuster family magazines of the 1840s, featuring short fiction, adventure tales, poetry, and historical narratives, along with numerous engravings and pictorial embellishments. *Graham’s* and *Godey’s* were integral parts of the periodicals machine that created a national, mass culture in the United States; in fact, Mott describes the decade of

⁴ Quoted in Frank Luther Mott, *A History of American Magazines, 1741-1850* v.1 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1939) 341.

⁵ Lydia Sigourney, *Letters of Life* (New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1867) 365.

⁶ Poe, “Graham’s Magazine,” *Broadway Journal* 3 (Mar. 1845): 139. *The Broadway Journal* was founded by Charles Briggs and first published in January 1845. Poe contributed to the first two issues. His name first appeared on the masthead, along with Briggs and musical editor Henry C. Watson, in March 1845. Poe later assumed ownership and continued to edit *The Broadway Journal* until it failed in January 1846.

⁷ Louis Godey founded the precursor to *Godey’s Lady’s Book*, *The Lady’s Book*, in 1830, but did not merge with Sarah Josepha Hale’s *Ladies’ Magazine* until 1837. After this merger and Hale’s assumption of the literary editorship of the magazine, the newly named *Godey’s Lady’s Book* rapidly increased its circulation numbers. Godey’s effort in the early 1830s shared a similar name, but it did not have a fraction of its later market force or popularity until the merger. Moreover, as Patricia Okker illustrates, the *Lady’s Book* of the early 1830s was composed nearly entirely of reprints and anonymous contributions; Okker credits Hale’s influence on Godey for his later decision to feature, publicize, and adequately pay American authors for their original content. For more on the publication history of *Godey’s Lady’s Book* see Mott 580-594; for more on Hale’s influence on the literary quality of *Godey’s Lady’s Book*, see Patricia Okker, *Our Sister Editors: Sarah J. Hale and the Tradition of Nineteenth-Century American Women Editors* (Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press, 1995) 90-109.

their dominance, the 1840s, as the “Graham-Godey era.”⁸ *Graham’s* and *Godey’s* epitomized the “golden age of periodicals” with their sustained growth and expanding national circulations throughout the decade. During this “golden age,” overall periodical publication rose six-fold, from less than 100 periodicals in 1825 to over 600 in 1850.⁹ Nationally circulating magazines like *Graham’s* and *Godey’s*, more so than book publication, were instrumental in creating and sustaining a mass culture that fed upon an emergent form of recognizable, accessible literary celebrity.

While knitting together disparate geographic and economic communities of readers through shared reading experiences, the publicity machines that fueled *Graham’s* and *Godey’s* pioneered new tactics that transformed successful authors into national literary celebrities. *Graham’s*, for example, was the first magazine published in the United States to feature the names of its contributors on the cover, flouting the accepted practice of anonymous publication employed by established periodicals like the *Knickerbocker* and *The North American Review* [See Figure 2.1].¹⁰ The consistent presence of authors like Eliza Leslie, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Frances Sargent Osgood, Edgar Allan Poe, Lydia Sigourney, and Nathaniel Parker Willis in *Graham’s* and *Godey’s* did more than parade celebrities “twelve times a year before a host of readers, in whose memories [they were] kept fresh,” as Inman observed.¹¹ Editors at both burgeoning mass-culture magazines were inventive in their marketing efforts; they aggressively published images,

⁸ Mott 494.

⁹ Mott 342.

¹⁰ Susan Barrera Fay notes that magazines like the *North American Review*, which refused to publish contributors’ names, leaked these names to periodicals and contributors so that they would be made known in a more indirect fashion. See Susan Barrera Fay, “A Modest Celebrity: Literary reputation and the marketplace in antebellum America,” Diss. George Washington University, 1992, 226.

¹¹ Mott heralds N.P. Willis as the preeminent “magazinist” of the antebellum period (495). Other serial contributors to general magazines with wide circulations were T.S. Arthur, William Gilmore Simms, and Park Benjamin. All of these authors also worked as editors for various magazine ventures (Mott 494-499).

autographs, and anecdotes about celebrities in order to both stimulate and satisfy public curiosity. As a result, popular series like “Autography” (*Graham’s*), “Our Contributors” (*Graham’s*), and “Godey’s Portrait Gallery,” discussed in subsequent chapters, turned contributors and their private lives into best-selling content and promised readers an authentic glimpse into the lives of literary celebrities. Yet, like Lewis Carroll’s Alice, whose hunger grew as she feasted on cakes, antebellum readers’ consumption of texts by and about literary celebrities increased, rather than sated, their appetite for more. These cyclical, self-sustaining forces of magazine publicity and readers’ curiosity significantly contributed to what Thomas Baker defines as the “conjuncture of social, commercial, and emotional impulses” characteristic of the incipient culture of celebrity in the United States.¹²

Mott distinguishes *Graham’s* not only for its contemporary popularity, but its lasting impact on the American periodicals market: “[*Graham’s*] was one of the three or four most important magazines in the United States—between 1841-1845 it displayed a brilliance seldom matched in American magazine history.”¹³ One critical aspect of the combined “brilliance” of *Graham’s* and *Godey’s* was the way in which editors and contributors collaborated to manufacture

¹² Thomas N. Baker, *Sentiment and Celebrity: Nathaniel Parker Willis and the Trials of Literary Fame* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999) 4.

¹³ Mott 343. *Graham’s* was not exclusively marketed to women, but Mott notes that under the influence of *Godey’s* “*Graham’s* magazine became half a woman’s magazine” (351), likely referring to George Graham’s insistence on matching *Godey’s* investment in pictorial embellishments. Sarah Josepha Hale biographer Ruth Finley describes *Godey’s Lady’s Book* as “the arbiter of the parlor, and the textbook of the kitchen,” thereby clearly delineating the province of the magazine (22). See Ruth E. Finley, *The Lady of Godey’s, Sarah Josepha Hale* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott Co., 1931).

GRAHAM'S MAGAZINE

OF LITERATURE AND ART.

GEORGE R. GRAHAM AND RUFUS W. GRISWOLD, EDITORS.

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WITH NUMEROUS ILLUSTRATIONS BY THE MOST EMINENT ARTISTS.

VOLUME XXII.

PHILADELPHIA:
GEORGE R. GRAHAM, NO. 98 CHESNUT STREET.
.....
1843.

Fig. 2.1: *Graham's* magazine cover page. *Graham's* 22 (1843). From the copy in the Rare Book Collection, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

and distribute a mass culture in the United States. In their zeal to appeal to the broadest audience, editors established policies about content that fundamentally depoliticized their magazines. In his analysis of what Baker described as the combined “social, commercial, and emotional impulses” that influenced mid-nineteenth century publishing, Jurgen Habermas clearly distinguished the prior century’s print public sphere from the increasingly commercialized mass media that supported large-scale ventures like *Graham’s* and *Godey’s* in the United States. The turn to privatized mass media is part of the larger transformation Habermas characterizes as the shift from “a culture-debating to a culture-consuming public.” The 1830s witnessed an increased commercialization of the popular press that freed it, in large part, from ideological pressures of the past. Some publishing ventures, independent of the political tensions that had defined them in the “culture debating” eighteenth century, began to assume the character and characteristics of private enterprise, thus freeing them to focus on profitability. As Habermas contends, the “golden age” of periodicals: “paved [the way] for this sort of transition from a press that took ideological sides to one that was primarily a business.”¹⁴ This is not to say, of course, that the world of antebellum magazine publishing was apolitical; party tensions fueled by major ideological differences and personal vendetta were at the core of both overtly political papers like George Thompson’s *The Whip* and magazines with broader appeal like Lewis Gaylord Clark’s *Knickerbocker*.¹⁵

¹⁴ Jurgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger and Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1991) 184. Habermas comments specifically on changes taking place in the United States during the “golden age” of magazines: “only with the establishment of the bourgeois constitutional state and the legalization of a political public sphere was the press as a forum of rational-critical debate released from the pressure to take sides ideologically; now it could abandon its polemical stance and concentrate on the profit opportunities for a commercial business. In Great Britain, France, and the United States at about the same time (the 1830s) the way was paved for this sort of transition from a press that took ideological sides to one that was primarily a business” (184). For more on the “culture-debating versus culture consuming” function of periodicals, see Habermas’ chapter of that name (159-175).

¹⁵ For an extended analysis of party tensions played out in antebellum periodicals, see Perry Miller, *The Raven and the Whale: the war of words and wits in the era of Poe and Melville* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1956).

Yet Habermas' distinction is important because it recognizes the independence of these self-styled party organs; these were not institutionally sponsored publications, but privately held and operated ventures that rose and fell with the market tide. One central market force driving publications like *Graham's* and *Godey's* was publicity, a tactic that explicitly marks these magazines as private enterprises. In contrast to the "handicraft shops" of eighteenth-century publishers, Habermas argues that mass media giants of the nineteenth century were doing the "big business of advanced capitalism."¹⁶ With this "big business," however, these ventures became more accessible and susceptible to pressures of private interest, most notably, pressures for profitability. In contrast to Habermas' idealized "rational-critical" debates that were fostered by and in the eighteenth-century public sphere, the newly commercialized organs of the mass media withdrew from debate and ignored the carnage of war and the distress of escalating political debates in order to appeal to audiences. *Graham's* and *Godey's* were certainly not alone in their largely apolitical stance in the mid-nineteenth century; Robert Bonner forbade Fanny Fern from writing specifically about the Civil War in her weekly column. While there were certainly an abundance of periodicals whose focus was on politically polarizing issues, like Frederick Douglass' *The North Star*, these magazines made no claim to represent the national taste as did the major mass media monthlies like *Graham's*, *Godey's*, and later the *New York Ledger*. In an interesting and perhaps inevitable twist on the Habermasian theory of print-facilitated discourse, the magazines that aspired to national standing were devoted nearly exclusively to cultural consumption, while the smaller, more ephemeral periodicals that harkened back to the "handicraft model" of the prior century discussed and debated the contentious political and ideological positions of the day. In other words, mass media periodicals addressed an idealized and largely fictitious

¹⁶ Habermas 185, 188.

nation of shared interests and values, while the smaller ventures came closer to realizing the reality of a diverse and fractured America. This development, perhaps more than any other major publishing innovation of the nineteenth century, is what marks aspiring national magazines and their creation of a mass culture in the United States as distinctly modern.

Graham and Godey were more than simply successful publicity mavens, however. Like their editorial contemporary John Inman, both were interested in the unique possibilities of the magazine as a genre. The combined immediacy and substance of the magazine, in contrast with that of the book or newspaper, made it an ideally situated medium to cultivate relationships with readers based on the recognized and familiar public personalities of literary celebrities. Godey traded upon his own celebrity in his popular “Arm Chair” series, certainly one of the longest running editorial columns of the nineteenth century. Like George William Curtis’ “Editor’s Easy Chair” which ran in *Harper’s* for forty years, Godey’s editorial series was a similar vehicle through which he could speak directly to his audience, relating his opinions about cultural matters and praising those authors and illustrators featured in his magazine.¹⁷ Positioning himself as a fatherly confidante, “Godey’s Arm-Chair” reflections were intended to suggest a cozy, familiar space for the editor to relate to his unknown readers. Consider the difference between Godey’s “arm chair” and the magazine’s other regular column, editor Sarah Josepha Hale’s “Editor’s Table”: Hale’s column featured book reviews and editorials while Godey used his column to boast about the magazine’s success, publicize authors and their works, and speak directly to his readers, whom he addressed as “my fair ladies.”¹⁸ The column titles reveal much about the different

¹⁷ Susan Belasco, “The Cultural Work of National Magazines,” *A History of the Book in America: The Industrial Book 1840-1880*, eds. Scott E. Casper, Jeffrey D. Groves, Stephen W. Nissenbaum, and Michael Winship v.3 (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2007) 266.

¹⁸ Finley 50.

styles adopted by Godey and Hale; Godey's arm chair conjures images of a domestic chat while Hale's editorial table designates her professionalism and commitment to her work.¹⁹

The increasing availability and subsequent popularity of magazines also changed reading conditions in the antebellum period. Editors and publishers were curious about how the more portable, ephemeral magazine might influence readers' decisions about where to read and what to read for pleasure. As Inman observed: "[Magazines] just adapt themselves to the leisure of the business man and the tastes of the idler—to the spare half hours of the notable housewife to the languid inertia of the fashionable lady. They can be dropped in a valise or carpet-bag as a welcome provision for the wants of a journey...they while away delightfully the tedious hours of a rainy day in summer, and afford the most pleasant occupation through the long evenings of winter."²⁰ As Inman theorizes, the magazine was a flexible medium that could contract and expand to accommodate a variety of reading experiences. The magazine was ideally suited for an increasingly mobile nation; like the railroad editions of popular works available in news stands, the periodical was a staple of travel. Yet in Inman's reflection, the magazine is more than a portable convenience; he invests the periodical with a unique ability to meet the needs of a diverse set of readers: business travelers, fashionable readers, and harried housewives. Fanny Fern indulged in similar reveries about how and where readers encountered her weekly column in the *New York Ledger*; thrilled by the possibilities posed by the portable and convenient medium, she imagines people reading her work on the railroad car, under a shady tree, waiting for a tardy

¹⁹ Patricia Okker describes the division of labor at *Godey's Lady's Book* (50-52).

²⁰ Inman, "Magazine Literature," 3.

husband, and nursing a baby.²¹ For editors and contributors like Inman and Fern, the magazine was a flexible medium that accommodated the needs of an industrializing nation. Yet it is noteworthy that many antebellum editors also invited subscribers to return individual issues so that they could be bound in cloth or leather. Emphasizing the substantive nature of magazine content as superior to the ephemeral newspaper, these bound semiannual volumes literally packaged the magazine in book form.²²

Ralph Waldo Emerson also noticed the changes wrought by periodicals on the reading habits of Americans, observing during a March 1854 lecture:

For who are the readers and thinkers of 1854? Owing to the silent revolution which the newspaper has wrought, this class has come in this country to take in all classes. Look into the morning trains which, from every suburb, carry the business men into the city to their shops, counting-rooms, work-yards and warehouses. With them enters the car—the newsboy, that humble priest of politics, finance, philosophy, and religion. He unfolds his magical sheets...There is, no doubt, chaff enough in what he brings; but there is fact, thought, and wisdom in the crude mass, from all regions of the world.²³

Emerson credits the influx of portable, diverse, and accessible periodical publications with “revolutionizing” antebellum American culture. The ubiquitous “magical sheets” perform the vital task of educating and informing the public, transforming workers of all stripes into, in Emerson’s words, readers and thinkers. Of course, Emerson and others did not believe all magazines to be equal to such an important task; he deemed the family and fashion magazines too frivolous for serious intellectual fodder or philosophical musings.²⁴ The long-planned Transcendentalist publication, *The Dial*, one of many new magazine ventures

²¹ One such reverie occurs in Fern’s preface to her essay collection, *Ginger Snaps* (New York: Carleton Publishers, 1870).

²² Belasco 261.

²³ Emerson’s “The Fugitive Slave Law” address quoted in Kenneth Price and Susan Belasco Smith, eds. *Periodical Literature in Nineteenth-Century America* (Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia, 1995) 3-4.

²⁴ Robert D. Richardson, *Emerson: The Mind on Fire* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1995) 332.

launched during the “golden age,” aired new young American literary voices and breathed fresh ideas into the limited scope of its readership. In this way, despite many differences in content, motivation, and intended audience, endeavors like *The Dial* and *Graham’s* and *Godey’s* had more in common than not. While the mass family magazines did not privilege the intellectual rigor found in *The Dial*, both ventures were invested in cultivating American talent and rejecting the reliance on British and European reprints in the periodical press. When Godey merged his magazine with Sarah Josepha Hale’s *Ladies’ Magazine* in 1837, successful British periodicals like the *Edinburgh Review* and *Blackwood’s* were the de facto template for many new publishing ventures in the United States. According to Mott, “most American magazines were modeled on English periodicals,” whereas the *Graham’s* and *Godey’s* were “surpassing originals.”²⁵ As Susan Belasco has argued, Margaret Fuller’s call for a “new literature” to be realized in the pages of *The Dial* was part of a much larger effort to characterize and display American cultural production in the popular media, an effort that transformed the American periodicals market.²⁶

Of course, with circulation numbers that dwarfed those of *The Dial*, *Graham’s* and *Godey’s* had a more immediate impact on the emerging mass culture in the United States. Their combined dominance during the “Graham-Godey era” of the 1840s also marks a unique moment in American publishing. Philadelphia-based *Graham’s* and *Godey’s* enjoyed their heyday during the last decade in which New York-based magazines and publishers were not yet dominant. During this “golden age” of periodicals, magazines and newspapers based in Boston, Philadelphia, Charleston and New York were competitive, yet by the early 1850s, New York City’s ballooning population and extensive transportation network had

²⁵ Mott 393.

²⁶ Belasco 258.

transformed New York into the undisputed epicenter of American periodical publishing. Local and regional printing industries were outpaced by the increasingly centralized printing centers of the urban East, and distribution revolutions like the more than 10,000 miles of new rail lines tracking to the Midwest before the Civil War, made reliable and rapid delivery of printed goods a reality. The expanding importance of the Midwest as a print marketplace was directly related to the increasing isolation of the South; as the tone of public debates about slavery grew increasingly bitter, many publishers either attempted to cut controversial material from printed editions bound for Southern audiences or cut their losses entirely. In 1849, for example, James Fields removed one of the most important southern periodicals, *The Southern Literary Messenger*, from his firm's review copy list, signaling that the South as a literary market was increasingly expendable to Northern publishers.²⁷ Yet while Ticknor and Fields would thrive in Boston and Lea and Blanchard would continue in Philadelphia, by mid-century Mott estimates that New York City was five times larger than Boston or Philadelphia and that its magazines had 50% higher circulation rates.²⁸ As Briggs crowed in 1845 in his short-lived *Broadway Journal*, "New York is fast becoming, if she be not already, America."²⁹

Prior to this consolidation, there was ample room for experimentation in the production and publicity of American periodicals. George Graham was particularly responsible for several innovative business practices that influenced American periodicals in

²⁷ Charvat discusses the increasing importance of the Midwest as a print marketplace in his chapter "The People's Patronage," *The Profession of Authorship in America, 1800-1870*, ed. Matthew J. Bruccoli (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992). As Charvat reflects, "The Midwest not only mattered—its cultural, as well as its economic and political, influence was by the fifties beginning to be crucial. Predisposed, like the Northeast, to a threefold economy—agriculture, commerce, and manufacture—it offered no serious barriers to cultural penetration from the coast" (301); Charvat on rail lines 299; Charvat on James Fields 301.

²⁸ Mott 375.

²⁹ Charles Briggs, "Introductory," *Broadway Journal* 1 (4 Jan. 1845): 1.

the second half of the nineteenth century. When Graham claimed in 1841 that his magazine had “ushered in a new era in magazine history,” he was not far from the truth.³⁰ Graham’s innovative practice of citing contributors on the front cover was a radical departure from convention that soon inspired his competitors to advertise contributors by name. Indeed, the practice became so popular in the United States that British author Charles Bristed mocked it in the January 1848 issue of *Blackwood’s*: “One of the superficial peculiarities of American magazines is that the names of all the contributors are generally paraded conspicuously on the cover, very few seeking the disguise of a pseudonym. The number of ‘most remarkable’ men and women who thus display themselves in print is surprising.”³¹ Louis Godey responded to his rival’s new practices with remarkable speed, and he fought hard to maintain his magazine’s reputation for fine pictorial embellishments. In addition to publicizing his celebrity contributors in his popular “Arm Chair” editorial series and “Godey’s Portrait Gallery,” Godey cultivated his own celebrity in the pages of the *Lady’s Book*, orchestrating a successful subscription drive by sending personally autographed cartes de visite to new subscribers.

The intense rivalry between the two magazines influenced the quality and publicity of both magazines in the 1840s. Both Graham and Godey invested in copious amounts of print advertising, key actors in what Jennifer Wicke describes as the “Barnumization” of the American advertising industry. Their commitment to reinvest profits back into their magazines is reminiscent of Barnum’s scheme to spend the first year of his profits at the American Museum on advertising, a decision that aroused public attention and generated

³⁰ George Graham, *Graham’s* 19 (Dec. 1841).

³¹ Quoted in Fay 227.

substantial media buzz.³² Moreover, their creative use of publicity focused attention on the names of their contributors, further establishing name recognition as an importance facet of antebellum literary celebrity and inspiring editor Robert Bonner's celebrated publicity stunts at the *New York Ledger* in the 1850s; his extensive publicity for Fern's serialized story "Fanny Ford," which emphasized her name and his exorbitant pay of \$1000 dollars, mirrors tactics used by Graham and Godey.³³ While authors like Longfellow and Poe were often ambivalent about their editor's aggressive publicity tactics, contributing authors largely benefited from the increased name recognition and exposure to a diverse audience provided by periodical publication. Successful careers in periodicals, like those of Washington Irving and Fanny Fern, often paved the way for book publication, as well.³⁴ Many aspiring authors came to view magazine publication as an essential step in their pursuit of literary success. As Fay argues, "[m]agazines offered writers access both to an audience and to the interlocking promotional machinery of the industry, and few writers could afford to bypass this route."³⁵

George Graham's institution of a sliding pay scale for contributors revolutionized magazine compensation practices and attracted a significant amount of publicity for *Graham's*. When Graham began his magazine, many of his competitors did not pay contributors; some clung to the notion that literary production was a gentlemanly pursuit, not a profession requiring remuneration. Of course, by mid-century this fiscal model and its

³² For more on Barnum's influence on antebellum publishing, see Jennifer Wicke's chapter "Spectacular Authorship: American Advertising Authors," *Advertising Fictions: Literature, Advertisement, and Social Reading* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988) 54-72; See also, Fay 256-263.

³³ Wicke 54-72. Both Finley and Fay also compare Graham's and Godey's publicity innovations to those of Barnum (Finley 41; Fay 256).

³⁴ Irving's essays published in *The Knickerbocker* between 1839-1841 were later published as *Wolfert's Roost*. Mott claims that Washington Irving was the highest paid magazine writer of the antebellum period; he was paid \$2000 per year for his contributions to the *Knickerbocker* between 1839 and 1841 (510-511). For more on the publication history of *The Knickerbocker*, see Mott 606-614. At the height of his popularity in the early-mid 1840s, Nathaniel Parker Willis came close to Irving's record pay.

³⁵ Fay 219.

attending myth of a male aristocracy of American authors would be entirely defunct.³⁶ In the meantime, those periodicals that did pay contributors offered between \$1-\$2 per page in the 1830s and 1840s. The *North American Review*, a conservative holdout against such changes, continued to pay contributors \$1 per page until 1850. With no copyright protection, reprints of European texts were free, and therefore most American editors simply provided the bulk of their content by clipping and reprinting foreign texts.³⁷ Graham radically improved authors' pay with rates ranging from \$4-\$12 per page for prose and an average of \$10-\$15 per poem. Longfellow received \$25 per poem in the early 1840s; in 1842, Lowell received \$10 per poem and Hawthorne received \$5 per page. Frances Sargent Osgood earned \$25 per story and \$10 per poem in 1843. In the early 1840s, Willis was the highest paid contributor to *Graham's* at \$11 per page. These rates became the basis for the "Graham page," which became the standard for authors' periodical pay. Nathaniel Parker Willis publicly credited *Graham's* "liberal pay" as having an effect on the American periodical scene "like a burst of sun on author-land."³⁸ Graham's scale was rooted in name recognition, with high-profile authors receiving more per page than lesser-known authors. Prior to 1845, when he copyrighted the contents of his magazine, Graham calculated an author's popularity and pay by counting how often their works were reprinted in western and southern magazines.³⁹ By the end of the nineteenth-century, Graham's sliding pay scale was the standard method for paying magazine contributors; influential magazines like *Harper's* and

³⁶ See William Charvat's chapters "The Beginnings of Professionalism" and "The Conditions of Authorship in 1820" *The Profession of Authorship in America, 1800-1870*, ed. Matthew J. Bruccoli.

³⁷ Fay 247-249.

³⁸ Willis earned approximately \$1500 for his contributions to a variety of periodicals in 1842 (Mott 506-507).

³⁹ Terence Whalen, *Edgar Allan Poe and the Masses: The Political Economy of Literature in Antebellum America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999) 72. Poe biographer Arthur Hobson Quinn attributes some of Graham's liberality to Poe's influence. Arthur Hobson Quinn, *Edgar Allan Poe: A Critical Biography* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, Inc., 1941) 324.

the *Atlantic Monthly* adopted similar sliding scales that recognized authors' names and public personalities as equally valuable to their body of work. Graham's practice revolutionized how American authors were valued, transforming literary celebrity into a commodity.

Graham and Godey were also the first magazine editors to take action to protect their investments in original content from high-profile authors. Theirs were the first American periodicals to copyright the contents of their magazines in 1845, well ahead of the American publishing industry at large. This decision was highly unpopular in an age of unregulated clipping and reprinting, but Graham defended his decision in his May 1845 edition by emphasizing his bottom line: "Some of the city papers object to the copyrighting of magazines but why should we pay four or five hundred dollars for a single number without having the advantage of the outlay?"⁴⁰ Although domestic copyright protections were possible under the statutes of the Copyright Act of 1790, such protections for the contents of magazines and newspapers were very rare. As Meredith McGill persuasively argues, antebellum debates about the practice of reprinting and the closely related issue of international copyright are firmly rooted in political wrangling over the federal government's power to exert control over the publishing industry. Vocal spokespersons for the Young America movement like Evert Duyckinck and Cornelius Mathews expressed concerns that the rampant anonymous reprints of American authors' works destabilized their literary identities and diffused their potential cultural influence. Duyckinck laments in his literary preview, "The Literary Prospects of 1845": "Native authors were neglected, despised, insulted; foreign authors were mutilated, pillaged, and insulted besides."⁴¹ Authors are at

⁴⁰ George Graham, "Copyright," *Graham's* 26 (May 1845): 239; see also, Mott 503.

⁴¹ Quoted Meredith McGill, *American Literature and the Culture of Reprinting, 1834-1853* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003) 202.

best isolated and unknown and at worst “mutilated” by inaccurate reprints and copies of original work; this, when authors were being heralded by Young America proponents as potentially powerful and influential cultural figures, capable of cultivating an American literary and cultural identity much as contemporaries Sir Walter Scott and Charles Dickens had for Great Britain. Moreover, Duyckinck, Mathews, and others argued, periodicals that relied heavily on reprints threatened to destroy more than the quality of American periodicals. McGill argues that Duyckinck’s reflections in “The Literary Prospects of 1845” illustrate Young America’s chief concern with the practice of reprinting: “what the reprint trade threatens to produce in American readers is an inability to discriminate.”⁴² Massive weeklies and monthlies like *Brother Jonathan*, *The New World*, and the *New York Mirror* were composed entirely of reprints, often with little regard for the quality of content, correctness, or name recognition of authors, since many pieces were either incorrectly attributed or anonymously reproduced. The emphasis on original content distinguishes periodicals like *Graham’s* and *Godey’s* from other mass market periodicals that threatened readers’ ability to “discriminate” quality from quantity. As Graham pointedly reminded his readers, this commitment came with a sizable price tag; to profit from his investment, he took the unprecedented step of copyrighting the contents of his magazine.⁴³

Graham’s and *Godey’s* were also in a privileged minority of magazines that could afford to secure exclusive contracts with celebrity authors in the early 1840s, and each extensively publicized their associations with the popular authors like Longfellow, Poe, Sigourney, Willis, T.S. Arthur, James Fenimore Cooper, and Frances Sargent Osgood.

⁴² McGill 202.

⁴³ Okker argues that Graham’s and Godey’s decision to copyright their magazine, although unpopular with their competitors, contributed to an important shift in perception about the ownership of literary material and extended the reach of authorial protection to the pages of some of the more prominent magazines of the period (91-92).

Advertising in the April 24, 1841 issue of the *New-York Tribune*, for example, Graham announced that George Morris, Park Benjamin, Mrs. M.S. Nichols, Robert Morris, and Theodore Fay would be “permanent and regular contributors” to *Graham’s*.⁴⁴ When Eliza Leslie agreed to write for *Godey’s Lady’s Book*, Godey published an “Announcement” in the December 1840 issue declaring that Leslie would “contribute to every number during the year.”⁴⁵ In the July 1844 issue alone, Graham claims to be the exclusive publisher of Longfellow, Bryant, and Cooper. Exclusive contracts lured both aspiring and well-known authors with promises of lucrative pay and security. Indeed, as the 1850 inaugural issue of *Harper’s* declared, “periodicals enlist and absorb much of the literary talent, the creative genius, the scholarly accomplishment of the present age. The best writers, in all departments and in every nation, devote themselves mainly to the Reviews, Magazines, or Newspapers of the day.” The “best writers” of the age were drawn to major periodicals that offered competitive pay and the opportunity to build a national audience for their work.⁴⁶ Seeking just such security, Hawthorne wrote to Rufus Griswold, who replaced Poe as *Graham’s* literary editor, in July 1843:

I am advised that the publishers of magazines consider it desirable to attach writers exclusively to their own establishments, and will pay at a higher rate for such monopoly. If this be the case, I should make no difficulty in forswearing all other periodicals for a specified time—and so much more the readily, on account of the safety of your Magazine in the financial point of view.⁴⁷

Hawthorne volunteers to be “monopolized” in return for higher wages, specifically citing the “safety” of *Graham’s* from “the financial point of view.” In 1843, Hawthorne was part of a

⁴⁴ Quoted in Fay 229.

⁴⁵ “Announcement,” *Godey’s Lady’s Book* (Dec. 1840): 285. Quoted in Fay 240.

⁴⁶ “A Word at the Start,” *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine* 1 (June 1850): 1. Quoted in Belasco 266.

⁴⁷ Quoted in Fay 249-250. Despite his solicitation, Hawthorne did not have an exclusive contract with *Graham’s*.

fluid group of magazine and gift book contributors eager to align themselves publicly and financially with the handful of major periodicals like *Graham's* and *Godey's* that offered financial security in the tumultuous periodicals market.

Boasts about the quality and price paid for what were popularly termed “embellishments” were even more common than those regarding authors’ pay. Both periodicals paid top dollar for high-quality copper and steel engravings, often spending more for one illustration, hand-painted fashion plate, or engraving than for the combined cost of one issue’s literary contents.⁴⁸ In the 1830s, the hand-tinted fashion plates featured in *Godey's Lady's Book* set the standard for quality in antebellum periodicals. Godey frequently publicized his investment in visual contents, claiming, for example, that he had spent over \$7000 on engravings in the first eighteen months of publication.⁴⁹ Within months of launching his magazine in December 1840, Graham seized an opportunity to topple *Godey's* preeminence in embellishments. Graham announced that his magazine would only publish engravings created expressly for *Graham's*. Graham dramatically reinvented the possibilities for the magazine’s printed page; a careful student of his predecessors and competitors, Graham found the crowded columns of type in many periodicals unappealing.⁵⁰ He hired a staff of artists to create original woodcuts, steel and copper engravings, and mezzotints for *Graham's*, most of which represented a kind of tranquil, domestic peace that characterized the mostly apolitical, popular magazines like *Graham's*, *Godey's* and *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* [See Figure 2.2]. Images of the middle class and its fashionable pursuits were

⁴⁸ Mott 519. By the end of the 1840s, *Graham's* and *Godey's* regularly featured two copper plate engravings and a hand-tinted fashion plate in each issue.

⁴⁹ Advertisement, *Godey's Lady's Book* 3 (1831); See also, Mott 521.

⁵⁰ Belasco 261.

often idealized representations of the same audiences that contemporary figures like Willis hoped would be influenced by his social elite, the “upper ten thousand.”⁵¹

Graham’s decision to commission an original engraving for every issue was shocking to the publishing community. It flaunted the standard practice among editors and publishers who frequently traded plates in order to cheaply republish engravings. More surprising, however, was his refusal to share the engraved plates with his competitors. Graham hired John Sartain, the most popular engraver of the antebellum period and later editor of *Sartain’s Union Magazine*, to work exclusively for *Graham’s*.⁵² According to Sartain:

[U]p to the time of Graham’s new publication it had been an unusual thing for the monthlies to have new plates engraved expressly for them; they were content, when they had pictorial embellishments at all, to use old worn-out plates picked up at a trifling cost....Graham decided to have a new plate engraved expressly for every number, and engaged me to execute the work. The boldness of the enterprise astonished me, yet I did not give expression to my surprise, or thought I did not.”⁵³

Godey soon followed suit, commissioning engravings, in addition to fashion plates, exclusively for the *Lady’s Book* [See Figure 2.3]. Both Graham and Godey advertised the originality of their engravings, noting those embellishments that were “engraved exclusively” for their magazines. Their competition over embellishments lasted throughout the 1840s and resulted in a marked increase in the number of engravings and illustrations featured in

⁵¹ Patricia Okker offers an interesting reading of the depictions of women reading, both in print and illustration, in *Godey’s Lady’s Book* (114-137).

⁵² Graham comments on his hiring of Sartain in the December 1841 edition of *Graham’s*. Hale biographer Ruth Finley notes that Godey particularly resented Graham’s exclusive contract with Sartain, as he prized his embellishments very highly (Finley 55-57).

⁵³ John Sartain, *The Reminiscences of a Very Old Man* (New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1899) 197-198.



Fig. 2.2. Domestic scene of women reading with fashion prominently displayed. *Graham's* (October 1843). From the copy in the Rare Book Collection, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

Graham's and *Godey's*, so much so that Mott refers to these two periodicals as the “picture periodicals.”⁵⁴ Certainly *Graham's* and *Godey's* were not the only magazines to pay exorbitant rates for embellishments; editors at *The New York Mirror*, for example, claimed to have paid \$1000 for one plate in 1835. However, their consistent practice of obtaining original material, both literary and visual, distinguishes *Graham's* and *Godey's* from competing periodicals in the 1840s.

While *Graham's* and *Godey's* were the twin superstars of the “golden age of periodicals,” the end of the 1840s brought about a change of fortune for both periodicals. On the upswing, *Godey's Lady's Book* continued to flourish; rising subscription rates brought its circulation numbers to over 100,000 in the years immediately before the Civil War. Although the magazine continued to publish fiction, poetry, and general information items, the contents of *Godey's* became increasingly aimed to a female, rather than a family, readership. Louis Godey's extravagant fashion plates of the 1840s continued to be a bedrock component of the magazine's success. Advice on fashion, trends, and patterns were a mainstay for *Godey's* throughout the nineteenth-century; Laura Ingalls Wilder recalled consulting the fashion plates in *Godey's* for information about style matters in the early 1880s, for example. Unlike *Godey's* continued success, however, *Graham's* magazine would never match its success of the mid-1840s. With the rapid success of *Graham's* came investment opportunities that eventually depleted George Graham's significant wealth; the magazine failed in the early 1850s. Although Graham later began another magazine, *Graham's Family Magazine* never achieved the success of his first venture. In a curious twist of history, George Graham blamed the failure of *Graham's* on his magazine's negative review of Harriet

⁵⁴ Mott 519-520.



Fig. 2.3: "The Celebrated Tom Thumb and His Equipage," engraved exclusively for *Graham's* magazine. *Graham's* (Nov. 1844). From the copy in the Rare Book Collection, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. After nearly a decade of brilliant management and manipulation of celebrities for his own ends, Graham failed to recognize the impact of the most successful novel published in the United States in the nineteenth century. Instead of blaming his financial over-extension and speculation for *Graham's* collapse, Graham pointed to his lapse of celebrity savvy. While Graham's explanation falls far short of explaining the complex series of choices that led to the demise of *Graham's* magazine, his decision to attribute his failure to the *Uncle Tom's Cabin* review is a poignant endnote for Graham, one of the most influential shapers of celebrity culture in the 1840s.

Chapter 2

“The Identity of Paper and Ink”: Poe, “Autography,” and Celebrity

“Strange, that the mere identity of paper and ink should be so powerful.”¹

—Nathaniel Hawthorne

“The rule applicable...is that of celebrity, rather than that of true worth.”

—Edgar Allan Poe, “Autography” (*Graham’s*, November 1841)

Featured in the November 1841, December 1841 and January 1842 issues of *Graham’s*, the “Autography” series was composed of woodcut engravings of American authors’ autographs and Poe’s critical commentary about each of his literary contemporaries.² With over one hundred signatures, it was the largest collection of reproduced autographs printed in the United States [See Figure 3.1]. The extensive scope of the series provides a snapshot of popular American authors, editors, and magazinists of the early 1840s, from familiar names like Oliver Wendell Holmes, Lydia Sigourney, and Washington Irving to nearly forgotten figures such as playwright David Paul Brown, poet Charles Sprague, and editor and novelist Cornelius Matthews. Poe named the “rule of celebrity, rather than that of true worth” as his only selection criteria. By focusing on literary celebrities, regardless of their “true worth,” Poe catered to a reading audience eager to learn more about the private lives of literary celebrities in a period of mass media expansion. Poe uses handwriting analysis to structure and support his opinions, but his unique focus on

¹ Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Dolliver Romance and Other Pieces* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1876) 167.

² While Poe acknowledges in his introduction that readers would prefer to either meet the “distinguished man of letters” or view his portrait, he endows authorial autographs with unique properties: “In the [autograph], especially, there is something which seems to bring him before us in his true idiosyncrasy—in his character of *scribe*” (Nov. 1841). Poe’s third place finisher, the autograph, is distinguished by a capacity to conjure a “true” representation of an author’s “character of *scribe*.” In Poe’s taxonomy, the product of the pen reveals an authentic glimpse into the character of literary celebrities.

literary figures transforms this exercise into a provocative exploration of the emerging culture of celebrity in the United States.³ The reproduced autographs function as imprints of personality and render “Autography” both a repository of celebrity identity and a primary source for avid antebellum autograph collectors. The product of sustained antebellum interest in both the analysis and collection of autographs, “Autography” exposes larger insecurities, for both readers and celebrities, about the burgeoning mass media’s erosion of authenticity and privacy. For while the interpretive claims of graphology were hotly contested, analyses by Poe, amateur analysts, and collectors were disconcerting to celebrity authors, many of whom were increasingly alarmed by demands for accessibility and intimacy made by readers and publishers.

The exclusive focus on literary figures and their merit distinguishes Poe’s series from that of other antebellum handwriting analyses that purported to reveal the broad strokes of individual character. As one graphology enthusiast argued in the October 1855 edition of *The National Magazine*, “a man’s penmanship is an unfailing index of his character, moral and mental, and a criterion by which to judge his peculiarities of taste and sentiments.”⁴ While

³ The art and science of reading the lines, whorls, and dashes of script for revelations about temperament and character can be traced to Johann Caspar Lavater’s four-volume *Essays on Physiognomy*, first published in German between 1775-1778 and translated into English in 1789. Lavater’s treatise on the science and practice of physiognomy included his brief reflections, later expanded, about the representation of character traits in one’s handwriting: “If we are under the necessity of admitting a characteristic expression in painting, why should it entirely disappear in drawings, and in figures, traced on paper? It follows then...that each of us has his own hand-writing, individual and inimitable.” Lavater’s chief contribution to the field of graphology was the notion that every person’s handwriting was unique, and as such, capable of revealing aspects of the writer’s character. Lavater’s ideas were disseminated widely; French philosopher Edouard Hocquart expanded upon Lavater’s initial treatise in his 1812 text, *The Art of Judging the Mind and Character of Men and Women from Their Handwriting*, and Benjamin Rush commented on the feasibility of accurately interpreting personality from handwriting samples in 1787. Graphology boasted both a scholarly and popular following in the United States. As *The New-York Mirror* reported in 1829, “there is indeed a sort of rage for the inspection and accumulation of autographs.” See Johann Caspar Lavater, *Essays on Physiognomy*, trans. Christopher Moore (London, 1797) 199-200; Benjamin Rush, *Thoughts upon Female Education, According to the Present State of Society, Manners, and the Government of the United States* (Philadelphia, 1787). Reprinted in *Essays on Education in the Early Republic*, ed. Frederick Rudolph (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1965) 28-29; “Autographs,” *The New-York Mirror* 7:10 (12 Sept. 1829) 75.

⁴ “Autographs,” *The National Magazine; Devoted to Literature, Art, and Religion* 7 (Oct. 1855): 356. Although this series was significantly smaller in scale than Poe’s “Autography,” the unnamed author rejects Poe’s series explicitly: “[This] is the first attempt, so far as we are aware, to popularize the new science, and give extended

“Autography” is similar in method to other graphology series, many of which were

delineations of character deduced from the handwriting. The eccentric Poe, we remember, did something of the same kind, but on a smaller scale...”

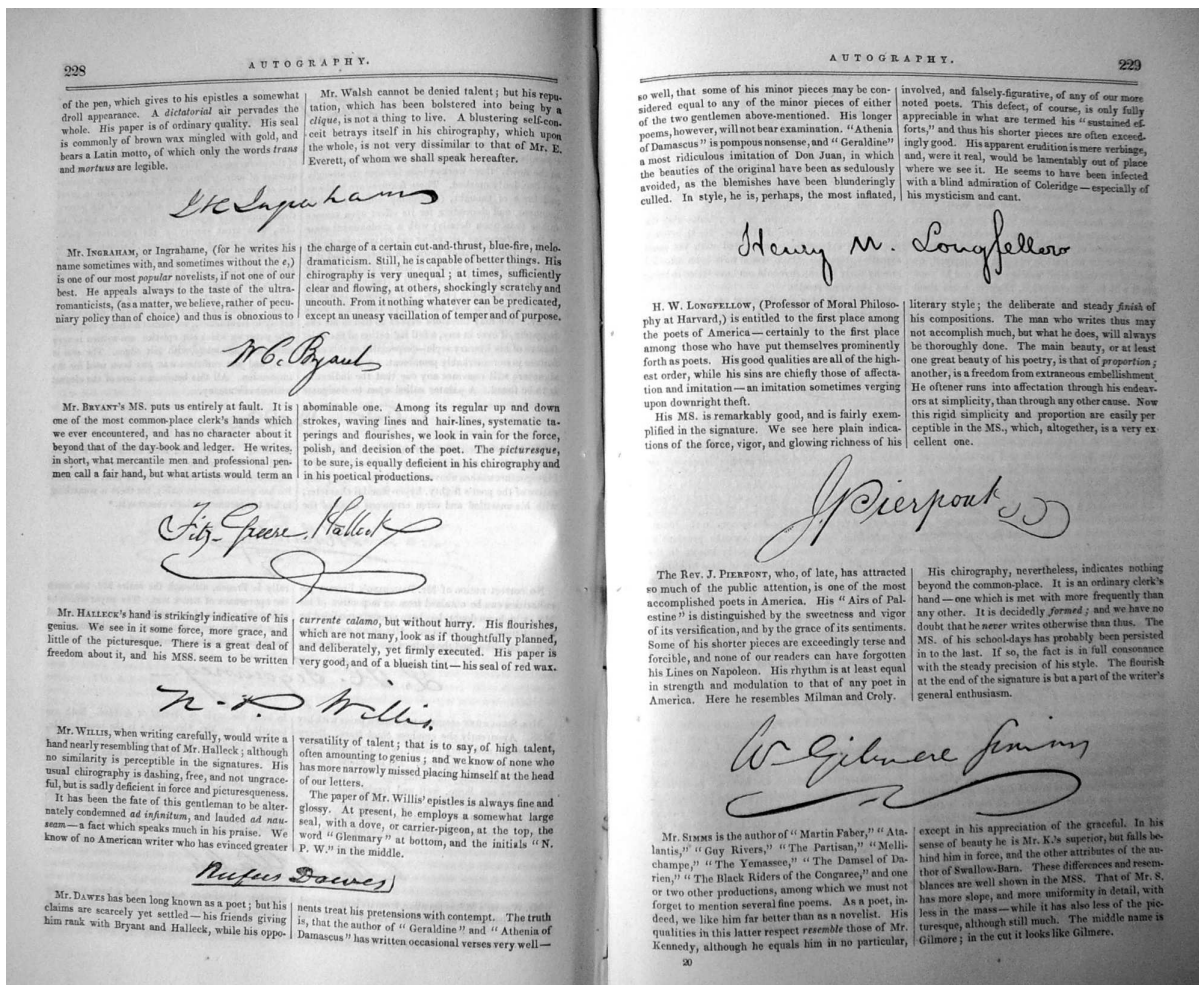


Fig. 3.1: Layout of "Autography." *Graham's*. (Nov. 1841). From the copy in the Rare Book Collection, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

published in contemporary magazines like *The National Magazine*, *The Museum of Foreign Literature, Science, and Art*, *The New York Mirror*, *Littell's Living Age*, and the *American Phrenological Journal*, Poe's analytical focus is unique. Other American series followed the British model established by John Thane, culling signatures primarily from politicians and other public figures.⁵ In contrast, Poe's handwriting analyses are focused on the cerebral and

⁵ Thane's three-volume edition was published between 1793-1798. It includes Queen Elizabeth's and William Shakespeare's autographs. See *British autography: A collection of fac-similes of the hand writing of royal and illustrious personages, with their authentic portraits* 3 vols. (London: Published by J. Thane, Rupert Street, Haymarket, London, 1793-1798). See also, Joseph Netherclift, *A Collection of One Hundred Characteristic and Interesting Autograph Letters, Written by Royal and Distinguished Persons of Great Britain, from the XV to the XVIII Centuries* (London: Netherclift and Sons Lithograph Office, 1849).

creative lives of those he studies. An author's genius, literary talent, and popularity are of more interest to Poe than a consideration of their generosity, patience, sympathy, and fidelity, all traits deduced from the twenty-two autographs reproduced in *The National Magazine*. Praising James Russell Lowell's handwriting as "strongly indicative of the vigor and precision of his poetical thought," for example, Poe goes on to predict that "the man who writes thus, for example, will never be guilty of metaphorical extravagance, and there will be found *terseness* as well as strength in all that he does." Poe's focus on literary aesthetics is evident in his praise of Lowell's avoidance of "*metaphorical* extravagance," in lieu of any commentary on Lowell's character (Dec. 1841). Poe's analysis of Oliver Wendell Holmes argues that Holmes' "remarkably fine" script reveals much about his literary style: "a quick fancy might easily detect, in its graceful yet picturesque quaintances [sic], an analogy with the vivid drollery of his style" (Jan. 1842) [See Figure 3.2]. Similarly, Poe's critique of author Thomas Dew is quick to point to his heavy and unornamented style of writing as "precisely in keeping with his literary character" (Dec. 1841).⁶ "Autography" is unique in its shared methodologies of graphology, criticism, and what Poe termed "literary gossip." Ultimately, Poe is focused on cataloguing his literary peers' genius, or lack thereof, while showcasing his own.

Isaac Disraeli's description of graphology as "the physiognomy of writing" emphasizes both the visual significance of script and the analyst's function as a decoder of

⁶ In contrast to Poe's analytical style in "Autography," consider the analyses in "Autographs," published in *The National Magazine* 7 (Oct. 1855): 356. When reading politician James Hauger's signature, the unnamed author interprets/invents a more complete picture of his character: "There is a vein of melancholy in his small letters, and we were half inclined to set him down as a weeping prophet; but those capitals and that comical dash at the bottom indicate that, after all, he may by possibility tolerate a joke, if it be a good one. We speak doubtfully, however, on this point, as sadness and mirth are very much alike in their phrenological development, and laughter sometimes comes from a sad heart and a conscious ill at ease."

meaning.⁷ In “A Book of Autographs,” Hawthorne marvels that autographs act as “living utterances” capable of “speaking face-to-face” with handwriting analysts. “Strange,” he concludes, “that the mere identity of paper and ink should be so powerful.”⁸ Writing in 1837, British graphologist Thomas Byerley described the analyst’s connection to author as an “intimate identification with another soul.”⁹ Tamara Thornton echoes Byerley’s jubilant union of souls, arguing in *Handwriting in America* that antebellum graphologists believed in the potential for “an almost mystical encounter between the writer of the hand and reader of

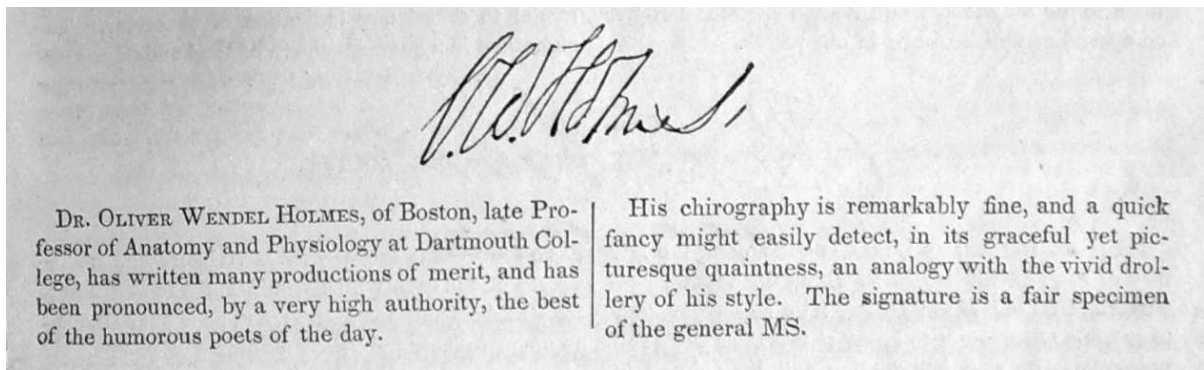


Fig. 5: Oliver Wendell Holmes signature. *Graham's* (Jan. 1842). From the copy in the Rare Book Collection, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

The hand...an intimate rendezvous of one soul with another.”¹⁰ Channeling what Hawthorne described as “the identity of paper and ink,” graphologists like Poe acted as autographic mediums, translating the innermost workings of the human mind through the study of pen strokes. Scrutinizing the height and width of letters, variations in the margins, slant of script, pen pressure, and spaces between lines and words, analysts believed they

⁷ Isaac Disraeli, “On Autographs,” *Curiosities of Literature*, 9th ed. (London: Edward Moxon, 1834) 5:279.

⁸ Hawthorne 147.

⁹ Thomas Byerley, “On Characteristic Signatures,” *Relics of Literature* (London: Thomas Boys, 1837) 370.

¹⁰ Tamara Plakins Thornton, *Handwriting in America: A Cultural History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996) 81.

could generate informed opinions about the characters of those wielding the pen. Legitimate handwriting samples, free from external influences or self-censorship, were valued as pure forms of self-expression. As one contemporary handwriting enthusiast claimed, “the characters of most men are assumed to ooze out at their finger tips, else whence this pleasing hope, this fond desire, this longing after—an autograph?”¹¹ Autographs were prized as material representations of individual subjectivity that promised access and insight to those able to, as Walter Benjamin later described, “see through objects into their distant past.”¹²

The intimacy promised by such allegedly unfettered access to another person’s mind was intoxicating, often prompting enthusiasts to describe the analytical process of graphology in mystical, rapturous language. Graphologists and autograph collectors were fascinated by the possibility of insight into another person’s unconscious afforded to them by the study of handwriting. Emphasizing the symbiosis of nature and the unconscious, Byerley stresses the combined influence these forces wield over the pen: “in using his pen, a man acts unconsciously, as the current of his blood impels him; and there, at all times, nature flows unrestrained and free.”¹³ He is enamored of an idealized, unadulterated process of expression, wherein one’s “current of blood” can indeed facilitate the “unrestrained and free” communication of ideas and

¹¹ Quoted in Thornton 87. Modernizing the rhetoric of the amorphous, unconscious “ooze” of character onto the page, twentieth-century graphologists repositioned the animating force of the unconscious to the brain: “though we write with the hand, writing is certainly not only a physiologic muscular activity. It is an expression of the whole personality, both in form as well as in content...handwriting may actually be called ‘brain writing’” (Mendel, 16). Although emphasizing the influence of the unconscious, images of “brain writing” and oozing fingertips both underscore the way in which personality is literally imprinted on the page. While antebellum handwriting analysts did not use the term “brain writing,” their practice implied it; the potential for unmitigated interior access that it conveys is precisely what motivated analysts to look beyond the handwriting sample and into the interior lives of authors. See Alfred O. Mendel, *Personality in Handwriting: A Handbook of American Graphology* (London: Peter Owen, 1947); see also, Paula Friedenhain, *Write and Reveal: Interpretation of Handwriting* (London: Peter Owen, 1959).

¹² Walter Benjamin, “Unpacking my Library,” *Illuminations* ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1968) 60-61.

¹³ Byerley 370.

emotions. Although references to the unconscious such as Byerley's were not uncommon in the antebellum period, the direct link between the expression of individuality and the unconscious proposed by handwriting analysts is noteworthy. A comparison of handwriting analysis with the popular nineteenth-century practice of phrenology illustrates the premium placed on individuality and the unconscious by the former. According to Thornton, the essential difference between these practices "lay in how skulls and scripts were imagined to reveal character."¹⁴ Phrenologists probed the bumps and recesses of the skull to discern the presence or absence of a specific set of common character traits, such as benevolence, combativeness, and wit, thereby positing a direct relationship between physical features and mental characteristics. Popular phrenologists like Orson and Lorenzo Fowler offered ordinary people an opportunity for self-discovery; their promotional materials invariably featured the tagline, "know thyself." As Madeleine Stern observed, "by the mid-nineteenth century it appeared that a phrenological bust might adorn every mantel and that the right to a phrenological examination might be regarded as one of the inalienable rights of every American."¹⁵ The Fowler brothers encouraged "every American" to realize their "inalienable right" to a phrenological examination through their clever use of celebrity readings in the *American Phrenological Journal* (1838-1911). These "unofficial" celebrity readings, frequently drawn from portraits rather than actual physical examinations, were intended to attract potential customers rather than emphasize the unique characteristics of public figures.

¹⁴ Thornton 85. Thornton distinguishes handwriting analysis from other pseudosciences for its emphasis on individuality. For more on nineteenth-century conceptions of the unconscious, see Robert Fuller. *Americans and the Unconscious*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1986. Fuller credits the introduction of mesmerism to American audiences in the 1830s with sparking new consideration about the different levels of consciousness experienced by those in mesmeric trances and laying the groundwork for psychological theories such as the "mind cure" (29-49).

¹⁵ Madeleine Stern, ed. *A Phrenological Dictionary of Nineteenth-Century Americans* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1982) x.

In contrast to the populist impulse of phrenology, handwriting analysts were concerned with politicians, authors, performers, and other celebrities who had distinguished themselves from the mass of society. Although interest extended beyond the small circle of celebrity later in the nineteenth century, antebellum handwriting analysts were interested nearly exclusively with procuring and studying the writing of famous persons. While a phrenological reading assessed the presence of common traits found, in varying degrees, in everyone, handwriting analysis focused on distinctive character qualities. Fueled by an antebellum interest in the romantic elevation of the individual, graphologists relied upon the unconscious to reveal the exceptional.¹⁶

A similar elitism characterized theories about handwriting analysts, as well. Hawthorne, for example, attributes the ability to analyze handwriting accurately only to a gifted few: “there are said to be temperaments endowed with sympathies so exquisite, that, by merely handling an autograph, they can detect the writer’s character with unerring accuracy, and read their inmost heart as easily as a less-gifted eye would peruse the written page.”¹⁷ Comparing reading character to reading a written page, Hawthorne argues that only those endowed with “exquisite sympathies” are able to reveal the information encoded in a stranger’s handwriting. Byerley likewise cautions, “not all are endowed with the ability to

¹⁶ The impact of Romantic philosophy on handwriting analysis is discussed at length later in the chapter. Thornton discusses the Romantic sensibilities that informed handwriting analysis, most notably the belief that each person’s script was unique and capable of revealing a “true” insight into the author’s character. This belief was coupled with an understanding that only the handwriting of a select few individuals could withstand the pressures of professional and educational training that threatened to strip one’s individuality from script: “The theory and practice of handwriting analysis appealed to romantics because it posited just such a sanctuary for threatened individuality and represented handwriting as just such a wondrous exhalation...representing handwriting analysis as an unconscious act was to relocate the source of individuality to a part of the mind that was inaccessible to external control and impervious to self-control” (84).

¹⁷ Hawthorne 167.

intuit and experience this sympathy...that intimate identification with another soul.”¹⁸ The quantities of genius and talent granted to analysts like Poe often exceed that of the authors they analyze. Yet while “Autography” was a testament to Poe’s combined skills as graphologist, editor, critic, and gossip, as an assistant editor at *Graham’s*, his primary goal was to generate interest in the series and the magazine. The series’ publication in one of the most popular and accessible magazines of the period transforms the handwriting analyst from solitary genius into an interpreter for the masses.

Like many of his contemporaries, Poe’s interest in graphology was not isolated from other popular pseudosciences of the period. In December 1841, while the “Autography” series was in publication, Poe had a phrenological reading, writing to his friend Frederick Thomas that the results “spoke of me in a species of extravaganza which I should be ashamed to repeat.” His professed modesty likely refers to the generous amount of genius credited to him in the reading.¹⁹ One year prior, in 1840, Poe published “The Man of the Crowd,” the chronicle of one man’s adventures in physiognomy. Ensnared near the window of a coffee shop, Poe’s narrator studies “the varieties of figure, dress, air, gait, visage, and expression of countenance” in order to speculate about the interior lives,

¹⁸ Byerley 370-371. The theory of affinity, or “sympathy,” between graphologist and writer recognized by Hawthorne, Byerley and others should be differentiated from the function of sympathy in the sentimental fiction of the period. Poe’s position as the intermediary between the celebrity autographs he analyzes and the reading audience he targets distinguishes his need for and practice of “sympathy” from its sentimental associations. Christoph Irmscher and Mary Louise Kete have argued that the rhetoric of sympathetic connection between authors and readers was primarily a medium for exchange and interaction, another example of Baker’s “market for intimacy” between authors and the reading public. Unlike the two-way relationship between creators and consumers of fictional texts proposed by Irmscher and Kete, the autographs in the series require mediation and interpretation to resonate with average readers. Poe acts as a conduit for the intimate information revealed by authors’ autographs. See Christoph Irmscher, *Longfellow Redux* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006) 21-31; Mary Louise Kete, *Sentimental collaborations: mourning and middle-class identity in nineteenth-century America* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000).

¹⁹ Dwight Thomas and David K. Jackson, eds. *The Poe Log: A Documentary Life of Edgar Allan Poe 1809-1849* (Boston: G.K. Hall and Co, 1987) 345. The reading published by the Fowler brothers in their *Phrenological Journal* cited Poe’s genius as a distinctive characteristic. Poe’s reading is republished in Stern’s *A Phrenological Dictionary of Nineteenth-Century Americans* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1982).

occupations, and class status of the strangers who pass by. The narrator is finally thwarted by the inscrutable countenance of one man; he leaves his perch and follows the man, only to finally determine that this “man of the crowd” is in fact impervious to his facile conjecture and probing gaze. Poe’s interest in mining the exterior representations of interior lives initiated in “The Man of the Crowd” is revisited and expanded upon in the “Autography” series. His intersecting experiences with phrenology, physiognomy, and handwriting analysis suggest a larger curiosity about the possibilities for and limitations of authentic representation.

Poe’s Ambivalent Authenticity

George Graham’s competitors were eager to reproduce “Autography” in their own magazines, but they were checked by the technical complexity of the series’ layout and Graham’s resistance to sharing the autograph woodcuts.²⁰ Immediately after publishing a favorable preview of the series in the October 1841 *New World*, for example, Park Benjamin wrote to Graham with a request to borrow the engraved autograph woodcuts.²¹ Likewise, the editor of the *Evening Mail* publicly expressed his desire to reprint the series in his own paper: “We wish we had the cuts, so that we might transfer it.”²² In *American Literature and the Culture of Reprinting* Meredith McGill notes that the series’ unique combination of hand-

²⁰ Poe later explicitly credited “Autography” with boosting the magazine’s circulation during its meteoric rise to success. See John W. Ostrom, ed. *The Letters of Edgar Allan Poe* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1948) 193. Poe remarks that “Autography” had done “wonders for the Journal” in a February 1842 letter to his friend Frederick Thomas.

²¹ Benjamin to Graham: “Will you loan the *New World* the wood-blocks of the autographs, which appear in your magazine for November?...If you will have the goodness to comply with this request, it will spare us some expense, and it will afford us much pleasure to reciprocate by printing your table of contents and by noticing the admirable style in which your Magazine is presented to the public” (Quoted in *Poe Log* 344).

²² Quoted in *Poe Log* 346.

carved woodcuts and mass production technology restricted competitors from simply reprinting the series.²³ The material limitations of the autograph woodcuts inhibited the fluid exchange of contents common in the antebellum periodicals market satirically depicted in the representation of unscrupulous editors, overworked editorial assistants, and exploited authors in novels like Cornelius Mathews' *The Career of Puffer Hopkins* (1842) and Fanny Fern's *Ruth Hall* (1855). Many reviewers focused on this unique visual aspect of "Autography," emphasizing the surprising cohabitation of boisterous handwriting and uniform typeset on the printed page. In a letter to Lowell, *Graham's* assistant editor Charles Peterson boasted that readers would be stupefied by the appearance of script in the printed text: "the public will be not a little like the wonderers at flies in amber, as Pope has it—they'll 'wonder how the d—d things got there.'" ²⁴ Peterson is primarily interested in how *Graham's* readers will respond to the visual impact of the page, rather than its content. His pleasure at astounding the reading public speaks to the novelty of the series. The *Graham's* "Autography" series was by far the most extensive collection of celebrity autographs hitherto published in the United States.²⁵ Reprints of the Declaration of Independence, complete with woodcut signatures, were the most popular and pervasive examples of reproduced autographs in the antebellum United States prior to Poe's series.²⁶ Poe's exclusive focus on

²³ McGill 177-183.

²⁴ *Poe Log* 344.

²⁵ Popular with collectors and general readers, reviewers for the *New York Mirror*, *Pennsylvania Inquirer*, and *Saturday Evening Post* praised "Autography" as "a chapter of wonders" and "the most finished collection ever issued." See *Poe Log* 346, 351, 356.

²⁶ The 1846 "Signs of Character" series featured in the *American Phrenological Journal* includes an issue on graphology that cites the "autographs of the signers of the Declaration" as examples familiar to readers. In his 1838 article "Thoughts on Handwriting," R.C. Sands also cites the Declaration of Independence as a set of signatures known to most readers. Although Sands is largely skeptical of graphology, he argues it is more accurate than the practice of phrenology. See R.C. Sands, "Thoughts on Handwriting," *The Knickerbocker* 12.4 (1838): 318-324. Joseph E. Fields credits William B. Sprague with originating the idea to publish the Declaration with reproduced autographs. Sprague was also one of the first large-scale autograph collectors in

literary personalities distinguishes “Autography” from popular eighteenth and early nineteenth-century British autograph collections, like those of John Thane and Joseph Netherclift, which featured reproduced signatures of royalty, politicians, and other dignitaries.²⁷

Requests to borrow the autograph woodcuts and reprint the series highlight concerns about authenticity and representation that plagued both the practice of reprinting and Poe’s practice of graphology. McGill argues that Poe’s play with autographs and reprinting speaks to “the way in which the authentic or original derives authority in relation to the facsimile or copy.”²⁸ McGill’s analysis focuses on the way in which printed materials, in this case original signatures and mass-reproduced autographs, confirm or resist claims of authenticity. Building on McGill’s reading, I argue that the autographs in “Autography”

the United States. He began his collection in 1814 when working as a tutor in the household of Major and Mrs. Lawrence Lewis, the latter an adopted daughter of George Washington. While at this post, he was given leave to peruse George Washington’s correspondence and to keep any letter of interest, provided he made a copy. Fields claims that Sprague amassed over 1500 of Washington’s letters. Israel Tefft also began an autograph collection around the time of Sprague. He continued his pursuit and eventually acquired over 30,000 autographs and letters, which his wife auctioned after his death in 1862. See Fields, “The History of Autograph Collecting,” *Autographs and Manuscripts: A Collector’s Manual*, Edmund Berkeley, Jr., ed. (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1978). The *Southern Rose Bud* (Savannah, GA) published a series of articles about Tefft’s autograph and manuscript collection, describing it in 1835 as one of the largest collections in the United States. The series, “A Day Among Autographs,” also includes interesting details about the popularity of materials and autographs from signers of the Declaration: “We have a letter from an eminent clergyman in England, [who wrote], ‘I now possess every signer of the Declaration of Independence, save one, viz. George Taylor...I have been presented with a proof impression of Trumbull’s picture of the signing of the Declaration, which I purpose binding with the volume which the signers are designated to form...’” (131). See “A Day Among Autographs: Part 1,” *Southern Rose Bud* 3:17 (18 April 1835): 129-131. The author of “A Day Among Autographs” (1835) identifies Sprague and Robert Gilmer, Esq. of Baltimore as the only other extensive collectors in the United States.

²⁷ Thane’s and Netherclift’s collections were also well known in the United States. An extensive review of Netherclift’s *The Autograph Miscellany* (1855) was reprinted in *Littell’s Living Age*. The review provides an illuminating glimpse into the history of autograph collecting and also refers directly to Thane’s collection: “Mr. John Thane gave proof of the increasing taste on the part of the ignorant, by the publication, for their use, of the well-known ‘British Autography.’” See “Review of *The Autograph Miscellany*,” *Littell’s Living Age* 11 (20 Oct. 1855): 595.

²⁸ McGill 181.

occupy the position of both original *and* copy.²⁹ Heralded as the artifact through which “true” character is revealed, autographs replicate authorial identity for a mass audience, acting as figurative copies of celebrities that are distributed in print. Just as original texts gain authority in relation to printed copies, individual celebrities gain value and name recognition from the reproduction and collection of their autographs. As a result, the “copies” in the “Autography” series and the celebrities they represent are in a feedback loop of authenticity and facsimile; they derive their authority from one another. Available to curious readers for analysis, even reproduced autographs gain credence as authentic artifacts of individuality, while the celebrity “originals” are subsumed into what Hawthorne described as “the identity of paper and ink.”

Poe attempts to elide questions about his authenticity and methodology in the series by vigorously asserting his fitness to judge script and writer, copy and original. Occasionally, however, authors disputed Poe’s analyses of their character and talent. The most animated printed attack on Poe came from editor Edwin Whipple, who criticized Poe and the series in an unsigned letter printed in the December 1841 issue of the Boston *Daily Times*. Dismissing Poe as a dogmatic egotist, Whipple writes: “[Poe] does not appear to form his opinions on enlarged principles of taste, but judges of an author by the manner his own particular feelings are affected.” Whipple concludes by noting the partiality extended to *Graham’s* contributors, remarking sarcastically, “as long as Mr. Poe is allowed to retain his position as censor general of American authors, it is well to know that the path to immortality lies through *Graham’s* magazine.”³⁰ Whipple’s attack draws attention to the glaring subjectivity of

²⁹ It is interesting to note that Poe’s description of John P. Kennedy’s autograph draws attention to this interchangeability of original and copy, as he praises the *Swallow Barn* author’s original signature for having “the clearness, boldness, and precision of a wood-cut” (Nov. 1841).

³⁰ Whipple’s letter was reprinted in the *Boston Notion*, and he soon contacted Poe’s fellow editor at *Graham’s*, Rufus Griswold, expressing his dislike of the series. John Du Solle published a response to Whipple’s

Poe's commentary. Notably, his accusations are echoed in Poe's November 1841 introduction to the series, as well. In order to establish the legitimacy of the *Graham's* "Autography" series, Poe first dismisses his satirical graphology series, also titled "Autography," published in the *Southern Literary Messenger* in 1836.³¹ Contrasting his sincere effort in *Graham's* with the previous series, Poe confesses that the 1836 article "was never more than semi-serious. At times, too, the writer was evidently led into error or injustice through the desire of being pungent—not unfrequently [sic] sacrificing truth for the sake of a *bon-mot*. In this manner qualities were often attributed to individuals, which were not so much indicated by their hand-writing, as suggested by the spleen of the commentator" (Nov. 1841). Whipple and Poe both acknowledge the inherent fragility of Poe's collective identity as literary critic, gossipmonger, and graphologist, yet neither rejects his methodological choice to combine criticism with handwriting analysis. Although with different motivations, both men affirm that it is Poe—not the autographs—that cannot be trusted.

Park Benjamin lauded Poe's "honest" and "correct" appraisal in his preview of the November 1841 issue of *Graham's*: "His remarks display great acumen and some severity; but they are honest and kind, and, for the most part, correct."³² Poe's harsh declaration that

allegations in the Philadelphia *Spirit of the Times*, concluding his piece by calling Whipple an "anonymous and skulking defamer." Quoted in *Poe Log* 354-357.

³¹ Poe's first published foray into "Autography" was a two-part series published in the *Southern Literary Messenger* in 1836. This series was radically different from his later series published in *Graham's*. Poe modeled the series loosely upon a well-known series of autograph analyses, "The Miller Correspondence," published in *Fraser's Magazine* in England in 1833 and reprinted in the United States in the *Museum of Foreign Literature, Science, and Art* in February 1834. The "Miller Correspondence" was an attempt to collect autographs from well-known public figures. It consisted of a series of fake letters that made inquiries regarding previous employees, alleged mutual acquaintances, etc. Responses to the imaginary Rev. George Miller's humorous queries were reprinted with the original solicitation letter. Poe's solicitations in the 1836 "Autography" purport to be from a "Joseph Miller," whose middle initial runs through the alphabet ("Joseph A. Miller," "Joseph B. Miller," etc.) in each faux letter. For an analysis of the *Southern Literary Messenger* series, see Jonathan Elmer, *Reading at the Social Limit: Affect, Mass Culture, and Edgar Allan Poe* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995) 37-43. The false solicitation of autographs is also addressed later in this chapter.

³² Quoted in *Poe Log* 344.

Colonel Stone, editor of the New York *Commercial Advertiser*, wrote in a “heavy and sprawling” script that “resembl[es] his mental character in a species of utter unmeaningness [sic], which lies, like the nightmare, upon his autograph” certainly confirms Benjamin’s claim of severity (Dec. 1841). Yet while Poe’s comments were clearly not “kind” to all concerned, determining Poe’s honesty, and by extension the legitimacy of the series, is more vexed. The problem of critical “honesty” and impartiality is embedded in larger questions concerning Poe’s motivations and intentions for the series. Straddling the disparate methodologies and attendant expectations of both handwriting analysis and literary criticism, Poe refuses to commit wholeheartedly to either. The resulting tensions between analysis and opinion, the shared clues found in handwriting versus Poe’s privileged position as literary critic, plague the series. Though Poe affirms in the introduction to “Autography” that a “strong analogy *does* generally and naturally exist between every man’s chirography and character,” it is difficult to untangle Poe’s interest in graphology from his potentially conflicting interest in judging his literary peers (Nov. 1841). Yet despite the inevitable influence of Poe’s “feelings” or his “spleen” on “Autography,” his interest in graphology was an ongoing inspiration for Poe, evident in his irreverent series in the *Southern Literary Messenger*, in the more substantial and ambitious *Graham’s* “Autography,” and later in his 1844 “Marginalia,” where he noted: “I am far more than half serious in all that I have ever said about manuscript, as affording indication of character. The general proposition is unquestionable—that the mental qualities will have a tendency to impress the MS...given a man’s purely physical biography, with his MS., and the moral biography may be deduced.” Poe’s editorial choices, criticism, and his 1843 prospectus for the *Stylus* speak to his “far

more than half serious” interest in the ways in which writing traces the imprint of one’s character.³³

Seeking to confirm the legitimacy of his series, Poe marshals his authority under a banner of critical accord in the final installment of “Autography”: “we observed so little discrepancy of opinion manifested in relation to the hasty critical, or rather gossiping observations which accompanied the signatures” (Jan. 1842). Juggling adjectives, Poe’s language draws attention to the competing claims of criticism and gossip that characterize the series. Yet he cites the alleged convergence of opinions as evidence of the “unity of truth” that draws Poe and his readers together. However, in this case, the “unity” of opinion is perhaps more accurately defined as a society of the likeminded rather than a representative sample of Poe’s heterogeneous audience. Positioning himself somewhat paradoxically as the prophet of consensus, he continues: “the voice of him who maintains fearlessly what he believes honestly, is pretty sure to find an echo (if the speaker be not mad) in the vast heart of the world at large.” While Poe’s “gossiping observations” likely found an “echo” in the opinions of some of his readers, his claims for universal agreement are, at best, grandiose rhetoric, and at worst, intentionally false.

While Poe’s published rejection of his 1836 “Autography” threatened his position as an unbiased critic, he privately scuttled any illusion of authenticity shortly after the January 1842 installment of the series. In a February 1842 letter to Frederick Thomas, Poe negates his published claim that he had “maintain[ed] fearlessly what he believed honestly”:

[The “Autography”] articles have had a great run—have done wonders for the Journal—but I fear have also done me, personally, much injury. I was weak enough to permit [George] Graham to modify my opinions (or at least their expression) in many of the notices. In the case of Conrad, for example, he insisted upon *praise* and worried me into speaking well of such ninnies as Holden, Peterson, Spear, &c, cc. I

³³ Meredith McGill persuasively reads Poe’s prospectus for the *Stylus* in relation to his larger outlook on market forces driving authors and publishers. See McGill 183-186.

would not have yielded had I thought it made much difference what one said of such puppets as these, but it seems the error has been made to count against my critical impartiality. Know better next time. Let no man accuse me of leniency again.”³⁴

Ostensibly the letter refutes Poe’s position as an objective critic by exposing his capitulation to Graham’s editorial pressures. Yet Poe’s motivation for writing the letter likely had less to do with setting the record straight and more to do with airing his concerns about the “injury” done to his reputation for “critical impartiality.” Poe’s private letter reads more like a lament over his potential loss of status than a wholesale rejection of his critical commentary. Despite his prior claims regarding the “unity of truth,” Poe was aware of those like Whipple who strongly disagreed with his project in both method and practice. Ironically, Poe’s characterization of the “ninnies” and “puppets” Ezra Holden, Charles Peterson, and Thomas Spear is consistent with Whipple’s criticism about Poe’s selections for inclusion in the series. Yet although he dismisses some of his work as disingenuous, the product of an unscrupulous editor and his own lack of will, Poe’s repeated admissions about his partiality and Graham’s interference can be read as efforts to separate the wheat from the chaff, the authentic and the corrupted, in his critical framework. Despite his public and private disclaimers on the prior *Southern Literary Messenger* series and his capitulation to editorial pressures, Poe remains open-minded about graphology and its use as a legitimate analytical tool. As he noted in his “Marginalia,” the principles of graphology themselves were “unquestionable”; the trouble for Poe and other practitioners was the imposition of selfish interests or critical agendas on their practice.

³⁴ John W. Ostrom, *The Letters of Edgar Allan Poe* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1948) 193.

Deducing Character from Handwriting

Poe's 1844 "Marginalia" reflections describe handwriting as a "physical biography" capable of revealing the "moral biography" of individuals: "Given a man's purely physical biography, with his MS., and the moral biography may be deduced." Poe frames his analysis of script as a variation on the popular "Secret Writing" cryptographs that he published in *Graham's* in the months prior to "Autography." For Poe, the physical manifestation of handwriting was a clue to the otherwise invisible interior lives and "true" characters of public literary personalities. The long-running "Signs of Character" series in the *American Phrenological Journal* claimed a similar ability to "deduce" character from the examination of the "physical biography" of handwriting. Series editors note, for example, "the writing of bold, energetic, and violent men, is heavy and firm; while that of timid and irresolute persons is of the most opposite character."³⁵ Rarely effusive, Poe praises a handful of literary figures for the forcefulness of character exhibited by their script. He commends Orestes Brownson for exhibiting his strength of character so plainly in his handwriting: "His MS. indicates, in the most striking manner, the unpretending simplicity, directness, and especially, the *indefatigability* of his mental character" (Nov. 1841).³⁶ William Ellery Channing is the recipient of Poe's highest praise: "we must not fail to mention a calm, broad deliberateness which constitutes *force* in its highest character, and approaches to majesty." In contrast, Poe derides poet and editor G.G. Foster's "deficiency [of] force": "his letters are never so well

³⁵ "Signs of Character" 334.

³⁶ Poe's analysis of Louis Godey also cites his "indefatigability": "The man who writes invariably so well as Mr. G. invariably does, gives evidence of a fine taste, combined with an indefatigability which will ensure his permanent success in the world's affairs. No man has warmer friends or fewer enemies" (December 1841). Poe's commendation of Godey appears in the same issue as his analysis of George Graham's handwriting, described as having "force and picturesqueness, speaking plainly of the *energy* which particularly distinguishes him as a man" (December 1841).

written in their conclusion as in their commencement. We have before remarked that this peculiarity in mss. is a sure indication of *fatigability* of temper. Few men who write thus are free from a certain vacillation of purpose” (Dec. 1841). Poe’s censure of Foster is primarily concerned with the evidence of fatigue found in the writing sample, rather than with individual pen strokes. His comparison of Channing’s consistency with Foster’s degraded script and threatened “vacillation of purpose” is consistent with a primer on graphology published in the January 1866 issue of the *American Phrenological Journal* that attributed bold handwriting to “a spirit firm, resolute, and determined...an independent, daring, courageous, but benevolent, philanthropic, and generous disposition.”³⁷

As with Channing and Brownson, Poe praises a small number of women whose handwriting is a metonym for their literary style. However, his commendation is rooted in an apparent *absence* of feminine characteristics in their handwriting that corresponds to a lack of femininity in their writing style [See Figures 3.3-3.5]. He applauds Catherine Maria Sedgwick and Sarah Josepha Hale for the “masculine style of thought” evident in their work, observing that “Miss Sedgwick’s handwriting points unequivocally to the traits of her literary style—which are strong common sense, and a masculine disdain of mere ornament.” To Hale he credits a chirography which is “far larger, heavier, and altogether bolder than that of her sex generally” (Nov. 1841). In his extensive discussion of Lydia Sigourney, Poe observes that “[her handwriting] has nothing of effeminacy [sic] or formality”: “from [the handwriting] of Mrs. S. we might easily form a true estimate of her compositions. Freedom,

³⁷ “Handwriting,” *American Phrenological Journal* 43.1 (Jan. 1866): 14.

dignity, precision, and grace, without originality, may be properly attributed to her. She has fine taste, without genius.”³⁸ Consistent with his remarks throughout the series, Poe is less

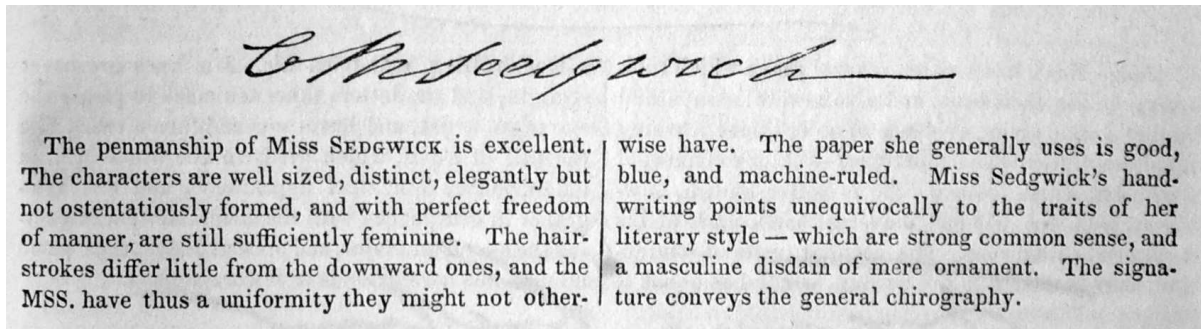


Fig. 3.3: Catherine Maria Sedgwick signature. *Graham's* (November 1841). From the copy in the Rare Book Collection, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

inclined to produce comprehensive character analyses and more interested in stating his literary opinions. Yet, Poe's remarks concerning Sedgwick, Hale, and Sigourney are first and

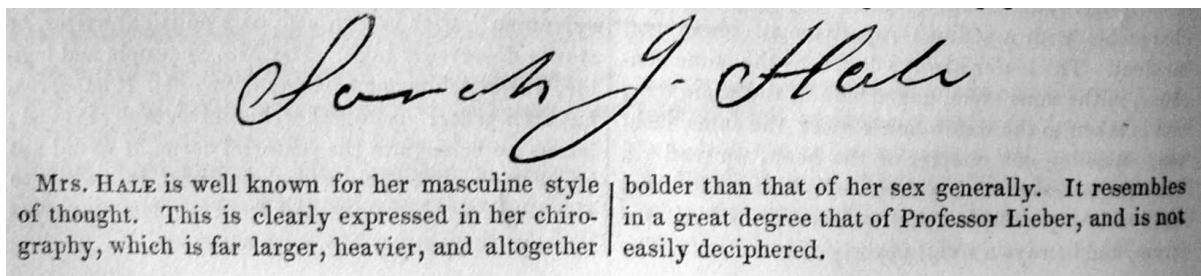


Fig. 3.4: Sarah Josepha Hale signature. *Graham's* (November 1841). From the copy in the Rare Book Collection, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

³⁸ Part of the “fine taste” Poe refers to may rest in the details he includes about the material aspects of her manuscript. As he indicates in his analysis of Nathaniel Parker Willis, Poe specifically comments on Sigourney's quality paper and use of green or gold sealing wax. He credits her with “taking pains” with her writing, specifically her use of “black lines,” or, a lined sheet inserted behind stationary to ensure that one wrote in straight lines. As mundane as these details may seem, they nonetheless provide insight into Sigourney's writing practices and her accordance with contemporary etiquette standards. The use of quality stationary and black lines are practices approved by etiquette gurus such as Eliza Leslie, author, editor, and the force behind *Miss Eliza's Behavior Book*, a popular conduct book. It is certainly ironic that Sigourney's manuscript, praised for its lack of “effeminacy or formality,” is in perfect accordance with the strictures laid out in the leading guidebook for women's behavior. See Eliza Leslie, *Miss Eliza's Behaviour Book: A Guide and Manual for Ladies* (Philadelphia: T.B. Peterson and Brothers, 1859). Leslie includes specific advice for women writers: “In writing for the press, [ruled paper] is [most] convenient. A page of ruled lines to slip beneath is indispensable to those who cannot otherwise write straight. They are to be had for a few cents at every stationer's. It is well to get three different sizes” (152).

foremost about the *lack* of such qualities as “effeminacy” and “ornament” in their handwriting. Rather than assessing their handwriting at face value, Poe must first strip their handwriting, and by extension, their literary style, of any traces of femininity. Once accomplished, he is free to praise them for the “masculine style” of their thinking and writing. Poe is hesitant to acknowledge these successful antebellum authors as women, a rhetorical juggling act reminiscent of Hawthorne’s infamous declaration that his female contemporaries wrote like “emasculated

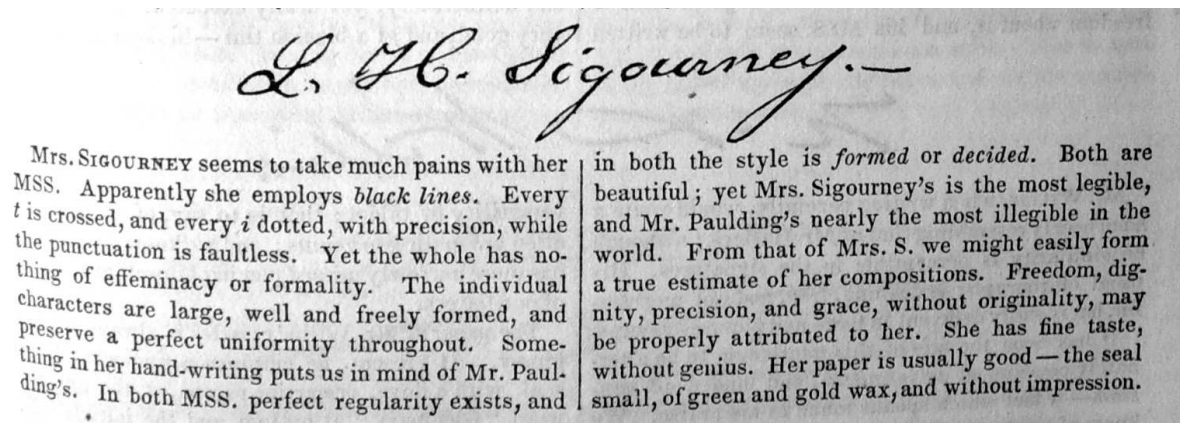


Fig. 3.5: Lydia Sigourney signature. *Graham's* (November 1841). From the copy in the Rare Book Collection, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

men.”³⁹ While Poe praises Holmes, Brownson, and Channing for embodying their literary identity in their handwriting, women’s handwriting is first disentangled from its creator’s gender before it receives critical attention.

Poe’s analysis of autographs and literary style often leads seamlessly to his consideration of authors’ aesthetic values and taste. Ostentatious handwriting was one frequent catalyst for Poe’s commentary about aesthetics. He repeatedly rebukes those who ornament their writing style, equating such a need for flashiness to a lack of talent and

³⁹ Quoted in Joyce Warren, *Fanny Fern: An Independent Woman* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1992) 121.

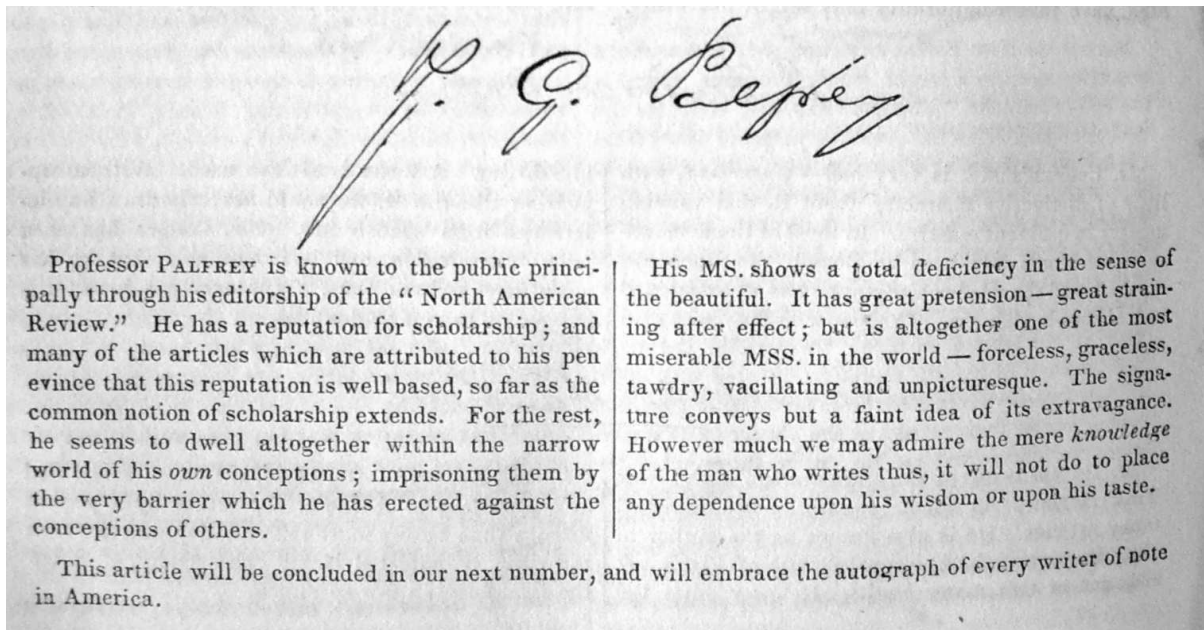


Fig. 3.6: John G. Palfrey signature. *Graham's* (Nov. 1841). From the copy in the Rare Book Collection, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

creativity. His extensive critique of John G. Palfrey, editor of the *North American Review*, epitomizes Poe's negative remarks about the "straining after effect" evident in the handwriting and literary style of his contemporaries:

His MS. shows a total deficiency in the sense of the beautiful. It has great pretension—great straining after effect; but is altogether one of the most miserable mss. in the world—forceless, graceless, tawdry; vacillating and unpicturesque. The signature conveys but a faint idea of its extravagance. However much we may admire the mere *knowledge* of the man who writes thus, it will not do to place any dependence upon his wisdom or upon his taste (Nov. 1841).

Rather than a ruthless character assassination, his abuse of Palfrey's "forceless, graceless, tawdry" handwriting can be read as a vehicle through which Poe criticizes Palfrey's overall aesthetic taste [See Figure 3.6]. The "deficiency in the sense of the beautiful" exhibited by his handwriting indicates a more extensive "deficiency" of taste and discernment regarding literary matters, a critical absence for a cultural gatekeeper like Palfrey, the editor of a major periodical. Similarly, Poe succinctly critiques the "meretricious" affectation evident in poet L.J. Cist's handwriting and poetry: "[it] abounds in ornamental flourishes, not illy [sic]

executed to be sure, but in very bad taste” (Dec. 1841). Poe’s aesthetic analyses often dwell on specific characteristics of script that spark his analytical ire and offend his taste. Poe’s critiques of poet Grenville Mellen’s “unsettled and often erroneous ideas of the beautiful” and “flighty, hyper-fanciful character” are based upon one specific feature of his handwriting: “His straining after effect is well paralleled in the formation of the preposterous G in the signature, with the two dots by its side” (Nov. 1841).⁴⁰ Although the showiness of the autograph, as evidenced by the

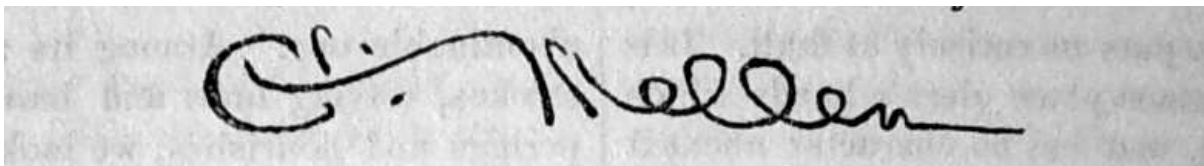


Fig. 3.7: Grenville Mellen signature. *Graham's* (Nov. 1841). From the copy in the Rare Book Collection, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

“preposterous G,” is Poe’s primary target, Mellen’s more egregious error is the absence of beauty and taste evident in his poetry [See Figure 3.7]. The lines of the signature, and most notably the offensive “G,” betray, according to Poe, his aesthetic limitations.

Poe’s comments are confident, at times strident, when wrestling with interpretations of aesthetic value and personal taste. This assurance disappears periodically when he attempts to analyze autographs that surprise or disappoint his expectations. A small number of autographs in “Autography” defy analysis, resulting in a provocative inconclusiveness that is highly uncharacteristic of Poe’s typical critical posture. After describing the lack of distinction and inconsistency in James Fenimore Cooper’s handwriting, for example, Poe concludes: “without appearing ill-natured, we could scarcely draw any inferences from such

⁴⁰ Poe’s negative comments about Mellen were ill-timed: Mellen died before the article was published. His entry in the series is followed by an asterisk, which notes, “Since this article was prepared for the press, we have been grieved to hear of the death of Mr. Mellen” *Graham's* (Nov. 1841).

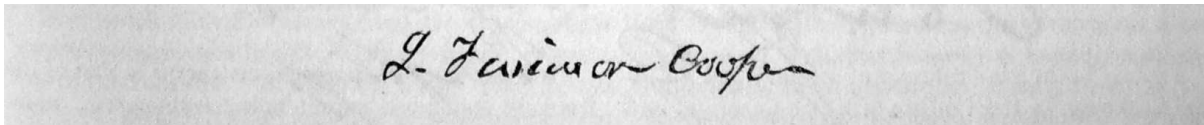


Fig. 3.8: James Fenimore Cooper signature. *Graham's* (Nov. 1841). From the copy in the Rare Book Collection, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

a MS" [See Figure 3.8]. The "unformed" and "vacillating" nature of Rufus Griswold's script prompts the curt remark: "nothing can be predicated from it, except a certain unsteadiness of purpose" (Nov., Dec. 1841). The critical blankness surrounding Cooper's and Griswold's autographs links them, perhaps unintentionally, to Poe's lack of commentary about his own reproduced signature [See Figure 3.9]. Prominently featured in the November and December 1841 installments of "Autography," Poe's engraved autograph replaced his printed byline. Poe's signature was likely meant as a cipher for readers, an autographic extension of his extremely popular series of cryptographs published in *Graham's*. Both series were premised upon a notion that secret information resided in specific constructions and patterns of letters; both also recognized those adept at penetrating such mysteries as uniquely gifted.

While Poe's solitary signature appears to resist analysis, this same absence attracts attention, inviting readers to decode Poe's character. Using the analytical tools acquired from Poe's extensive tutorial in "Autography," readers could attempt to discover Poe's true character and, more importantly, recognize his genius by parsing his signature. Yet unlike Poe's autographic cryptograph for readers, Cooper's and Griswold's autographs baffle the consummate critic. Poe briskly analyzes over one hundred signatures for the series, often with extensive commentary, and yet there are a small number of authors whose handwriting Poe deems inscrutable. What causes Poe to draw a blank? Perhaps the answer lies in the slipshod penmanship of both Cooper and Griswold; both scripts are described as erratic, and perhaps it is simply their illegibility that stymies Poe's analysis. The choice to include the

unreadable autographs in the series is particularly interesting, however. Rather than withdrawing them from consideration, Poe chose to highlight their impenetrability in his critical analyses.

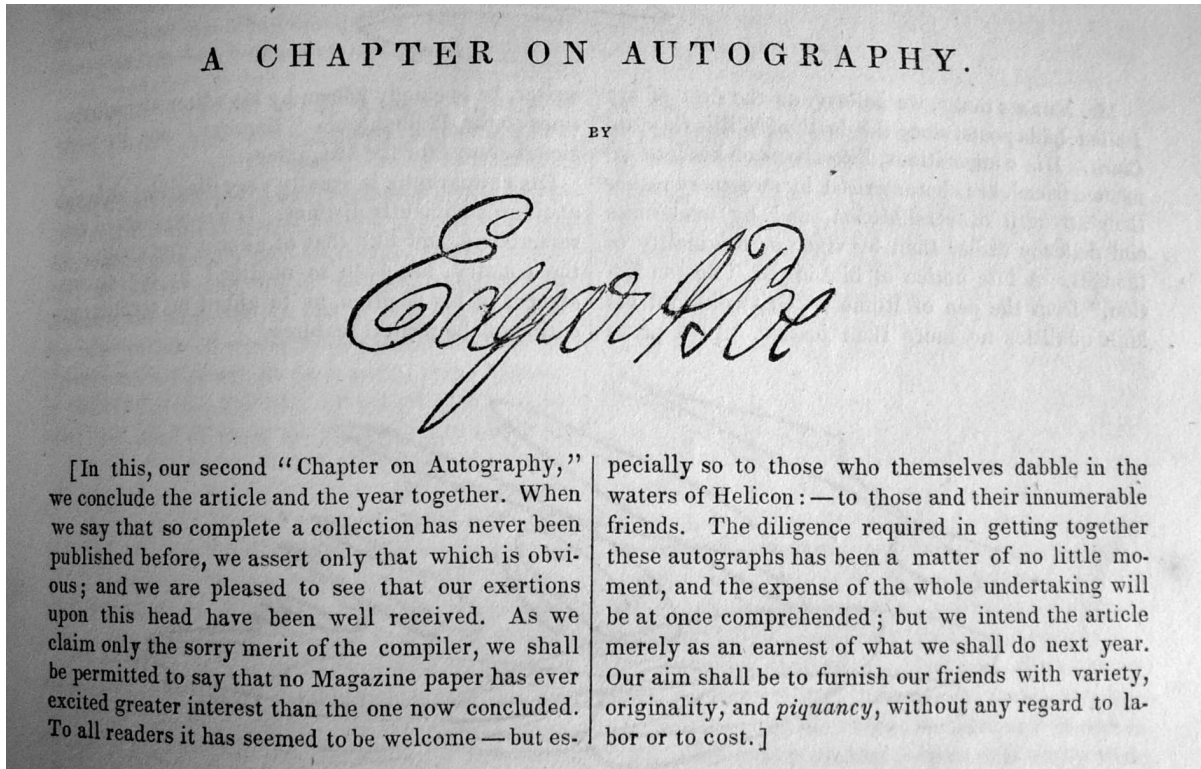


Fig. 3.9: Edgar Allan Poe signature. *Graham's* (Dec. 1841). From the copy in the Rare Book Collection, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

These enigmatic autographs successfully camouflage authors from Poe's scrutiny. Just as the impassive stranger baffles the narrator's easy assumption of interior access in "The Man of the Crowd," inscrutable script shakes Poe's interpretive authority. In his reading of Poe's short story, John Kasson observes "Poe's narrator offers both a virtuoso performance of physiognomic reading and an exposure of its limits."⁴¹ Poe's inability to analyze certain specimens of handwriting similarly exposes the limitations of his hybrid exercise in graphology and criticism. While the narrator's physiognomic readings are only

⁴¹ John Kasson, *Rudeness and Civility: Manners in Nineteenth-Century Urban America* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1990) 84.

limited by the isolated “man of the crowd” in the story and Poe is thwarted by a small number of autographs, such failures still raise questions about the efficacy of handwriting analysis and physiognomy, and more pressingly, about the ability to “read” strangers at all. If interpretive methods that rely on exterior representation can be circumvented, how can they be relied upon to provide accurate information? How can an analyst make sense of scripts and faces that are unreadable?

Poe voices his anxiety about these questions by frequently challenging the authenticity of both the handwriting and the individuals he analyzes. A concern about affectation in both script and individual is a refrain in the series, one shared by the growing community of handwriting analysts in the antebellum United States. In one particularly vituperative example, Poe condemns both Ralph Waldo Emerson, whom he identifies for his contemporaries as “the soul—or the sun—or the shadow” of the *Dial*, and his handwriting for being pretentious and artificial [See Figure 3.10]. He instructs his readers that Emerson’s literary deficiencies are also manifested in his handwriting and therefore discernable to readers who would be guided by Poe: “His ms. is bad, sprawling, illegible and irregular—although sufficiently bold. This latter trait may be, and no doubt is, only a portion of his general affectation” (Jan. 1842). Poe’s conclusion that Emerson’s script was



Fig. 3.10: Ralph Waldo Emerson signature. *Graham's* (Jan. 1842). From the copy in the Rare Book Collection, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

“affected” is far more than an attack on the aesthetic quality of his handwriting. Poe’s assessment insinuated that both Emerson and his handwriting were unoriginal.

Poe frequently laments exterior forces that obscure the individuality of autographs, and, as a result, hinder his analysis of the author behind the script. He blames boarding school training in penmanship for the uniform, insipid handwriting of women writers like Emma Embury and C.H. Waterman (Nov. 1841). Likewise, he disparages those men whose script bears the imprint of a profession rather than the stamp of character. Poe is critical of playwright and lawyer David Paul Brown: “His chirography has no doubt been strongly modified by the circumstances of his position. No one can expect a lawyer in full practice to give in his ms. any true indication of his intellect or character” (Dec. 1841). Although ostensibly disparaging the influence of Brown’s profession on his handwriting, Poe’s critique is ultimately self-serving. He is dissatisfied that Brown’s signature, like those of Cooper and Griswold, deflects his penetrating analysis of the lawyer’s “intellect and character.” While it is impossible to determine if Brown was, as Poe suggests, willfully disguising his handwriting for professional reasons, Poe is clearly frustrated by his inability to access the “true” nature of Brown’s character. Members of the editorial corps are particularly guilty. Poe consistently maintains that the demands of commercial work and the heavy burden of correspondence turned editors’ handwriting into “ordinary clerk’s hand[s], meaning nothing,” or as he more succinctly phrased it “too *clerky* for my taste,” an interesting comment relevant to Poe’s own work as an editor.⁴²

Poe was particularly troubled by the professional degradation evident in William Cullen Bryant’s handwriting:

⁴² Quotes are drawn from Poe’s comments about John C. McCabe, contributor to the *Southern Literary Messenger* and author Thomas G. Spear. Poe’s concerns about the lack of individuality in editors’ handwriting are also prominent in his analyses of Epes Sargent, John Greenleaf Whittier, Joseph Neal, George Morris and others.

Mr. Bryant's ms. puts us entirely at fault. It is one of the most commonplace clerk's hands which we ever encountered, and has no character about it beyond that of the day-book and the ledger. He writes, in short, what mercantile and professional penmen call a fair hand, but what artists would term an abominable one. Among its regular up and down strokes, waving lines and hair-lines, systematic taperings and flourishes, we look in vain for the force, polish, and decision of the poet. The *picturesque*, to be sure, is equally deficient in his chirography and in his poetical productions (Nov. 1841).⁴³

Poe abruptly reevaluates Bryant's aesthetic value, because his "clerk's hand" lacks the force and polish Poe expects in a poet's hand [See Figure 3.11]. Yet his critique of the "picturesque" in Bryant's poetry, or lack thereof, rings hollow. Poe is ultimately much less concerned with the quality of Bryant's poetry than he is with the fact that Bryant does not, in fact, *write* like a poet. Bryant's script indeed puts Poe "at fault," because it illustrates the potential disparity between one's internal composition and external representation. Furthermore, his persistent interest in the correlation of handwriting and artistic merit renders Bryant's "commonplace clerk's hand" a particular disappointment.

In his paean to graphology, Byerley observed "the great mass of people are mere negatives" who, trained to copy handwriting samples, lost their own originality.⁴⁴ Those whose script escaped the rigorous sameness of writing masters, ladies' seminary training, or professional demands were distinguished as exceptional. As Thornton has persuasively argued, antebellum graphologists, or "handwriting romantics," were profoundly interested in the integrity of the individual, especially in the face of crushing social, educational, and professional pressures that threatened the unique inner sanctum of personality: "The theory and practice of handwriting analysis appealed to romantics because it posited a sanctuary for

⁴³ Poe's negative opinion of Bryant's script was shared by John Henry Ingram; his *The Philosophy of Handwriting* (1879), written under the pen name Don Felix de Salamanca, favorably describes Whitman's handwriting: "It must be confessed that far more vigor, real unaffected originality and even masculine beauty is discoverable in one short hasty note of Whitman's than in fifty folio pages of Bryant's or Whittier's conventional manuscript" (173). Quoted in M.N. Bunker, *What Handwriting Tells You about yourself, your friends, and famous people* (Chicago: Nelson-Hall Company, 1939).

⁴⁴ Byerley 370-371.

threatened individuality and represented handwriting as just such a wondrous exhalation.”⁴⁵

For Poe and his fellow “handwriting romantics,” only those able to preserve their individuality in the face of external pressures were truly capable of genius. Emerson’s “affectation” and Bryant’s “abominable” clerk’s hand fueled Poe’s attack on their popular and critical reputations. Poe refused to identify genius in those whose handwriting he considered mired in the ordinary.

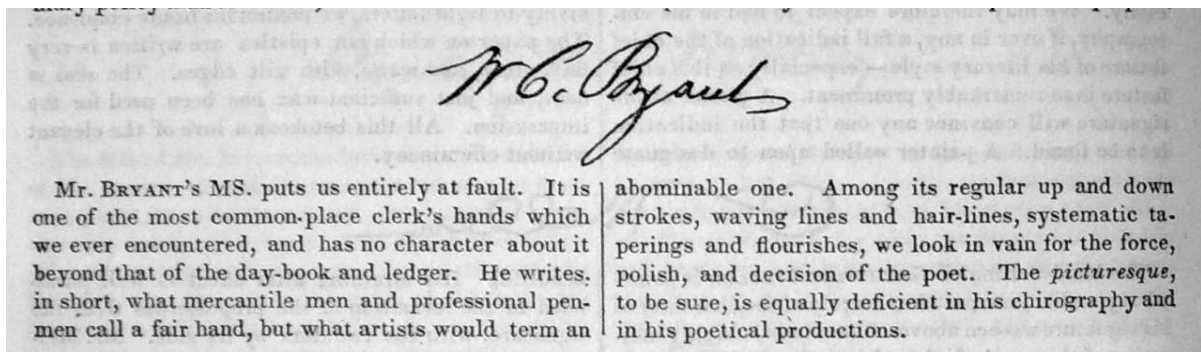


Fig. 3.11: William Cullen Bryant signature. *Graham's* (Nov. 1841). From the copy in the Rare Book Collection, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

Uncertainty about the legitimacy of handwriting samples was the inescapable elephant in the graphologist’s study. If handwriting was disguised or corrupted by either circumstance or education, such as the direct solicitation of an autograph or instruction from a writing master, an analyst could determine little of the writer’s true character. Critics of graphology argued that it was impossible to acquire authentic handwriting samples. As one skeptic observed:

Character was once supposed to be indicated by the handwriting, and so it became fashionable to collect the autographs of remarkable persons. But since Messrs. Carstairs, Jones, Bristow, and the other “reformers of illegible hands,” have come

⁴⁵ Thornton 88.

among us, the passion for autographs is on the decline, and for a good reason: they teach all their pupils to write alike.⁴⁶

Writing masters like Carstairs, Jones and Bristow, the “reformers of illegible hands,” are credited with destroying the individuality of script at the expense of clarity. Despite the author’s claim that the “passion for autographs is on the decline,” autograph collecting continued to be popular throughout the nineteenth century. Yet skeptics continued to scoff at the prospect of obtaining an authentic handwriting sample or, for that matter, an honest handwriting analyst. As one critic in the *New York Mirror* argued:

There is indeed a sort of rage for the inspection and accumulation of autographs, and those who have a high opinion of their own acuteness pretend that they can form a just opinion of a person’s character from such an examination. This is an idle boast...[t]he proper mode of ascertaining the skill of discovery, or what ought rather to be called the felicity of conjecture, on these occasions, would be the production of the hand-writing of one whom the inspector had never seen or heard of, not of the autographs of well-known personages. In the latter case, the judgment is generally decided by what was previously known.⁴⁷

Exposing the potential for bias in analyses of “well-known personages,” the critic challenges graphologists to instead turn their attention to anonymous handwriting samples, untainted by the public details of celebrity personality or taste. The passage also illustrates increasing ubiquity of celebrities in the period; these fixtures of popular culture are so common, information about them is so accessible, that the skeptic argues a fair analysis to be nigh impossible. The anonymous author essentially calls graphology’s bluff by dismissing successful analyses as the product of prior knowledge, rather than the revelatory nature of handwriting. The censure of pre-judgment here applied to graphology is particularly apt when applied to Poe’s assessment of his literary peers in “Autography,” as well.

⁴⁶ “Article 5—No Title,” *The New-York Mirror* 12:30 (24 Jan. 1835): 240; “Autographs,” *The New-York Mirror* 7:10 (12 Sept. 1829): 75.

⁴⁷ “Autographs,” *The New-York Mirror* 7:10 (12 Sept. 1829): 75.

Measures taken by analysts and autograph collectors to procure authentic handwriting samples reveal their concerns about legitimacy. Seasoned autograph collectors frequently advised novices to make their requests in a circuitous manner, claiming that direct autograph requests interfered with what Byerley described as the “unrestrained and free” force of the unconscious. As one writer for the *Home Journal* advised: “There is something furtive about a true autograph...We should come by it obliquely, and not by direct attack. A name written at the request of a stranger is only about as valuable as the same name stamped by machinery. To have any character, it should have been written in a careless or confidential moment, without the recollection that there was a collection in the world.”⁴⁸ Comparing a solicited autograph to the product of a machine, the author reinforces a romantic rejection of the dehumanizing forces of industrialization and their impact on individual expression. The obsession with authentic handwriting samples, often procured by “furtive” or dishonest schemes, illustrates the paradoxical obsession with authenticity that inspired analysts and collectors to lie in their pursuit of “true” insights into the minds of celebrities. The extensive collection of autographs in the “Miller Correspondence” and Poe’s 1836 “Autography” series are excellent examples of successful “furtive” solicitations; both popular features reprinted their hoax solicitation letters alongside the ill-gotten autographs. These successful mock solicitations were part of a larger transformation in the nature of the autograph request. Unscrupulous autograph collectors were inspired by series like the “Miller Correspondence” to mail numerous requests to literary celebrities, thereby earning the vocal disfavor of the literary elite. As the final section of the chapter argues,

⁴⁸ “A Modest Endeavor to Locate the Compliment in an Autograph,” *Home Journal* 16 (19 April 1851): 2. Although this piece was published anonymously, it is likely the work of N.P. Willis, editor of the *Home Journal* from 1846 until his death in 1867. The author attributes his motivation for writing the piece to his “perception sharpened by an unusual rush for our talismanic eight letters.” The article was reprinted almost immediately under the title “Autographs” in *The North American Miscellany; a Weekly Magazine of Choice Selections from the Current Literature of this Country and Europe* 2:14 (3 May 1851): 39.

literary celebrities were antagonistic toward autograph seekers for reasons that went far beyond inconvenience or simple aggravation.

“Autographic Vampires”: the dangers and delights of collecting

In his satirical rejoinder to autograph collectors, reprinted in *The New-York Mirror* in 1842, Thomas Hood chronicles the various uses of autographs throughout history. He briefly observes: “According to Lord Byron, the Greek girls compound autographs as apothecaries make up prescriptions; with such materials as flowers, herbs, pebbles, ashes, and bits of coal.”⁴⁹ Hood’s reference to the mystical properties associated with autographs illustrates both the desirability and danger associated with autograph collecting in the antebellum period. The notion that autographs were talismans of individuality, to be hoarded or compounded in herbal mixtures, was what drove eager collectors in their pursuit and threatened the privacy of celebrity authors. Popular magazines like *The New-York Mirror*, the *Knickerbocker*, the *National Magazine*, and many others frequently commented on the practice of autograph collecting and the sale of major autograph collections.⁵⁰ In 1835, the *Southern Rose Bud* began a three-part series about one of the foremost autograph collectors in the antebellum United States, Israel Tefft of Savannah. The author describes the many treasures

⁴⁹ Thomas Hood, “Hood on Autographs,” *The New-York Mirror* 20.9 (26 Feb. 1842): 69.

⁵⁰ *The Museum of Foreign Literature, Science and Art* reported in May 1833 on the sale of one major autograph collection in England for five hundred pounds, noting that “a very interesting volume, throwing much light on the domestic condition of many men of genius, might be made out of what we looked over.” See “Gossip on Literature,” *The Museum of Foreign Literature, Science, and Art* 22 (May 1833): 131. For more on the sale of autograph collections, see “Autographs,” *The Corsair* 1 (28 Sept. 1839): 29. The review of *The Autograph Miscellany* (Netherclift and Durlacher) featured in *Littell’s Living Age* included an extensive history of autograph collecting, see “Review of The Autograph Miscellany,” *Littell’s Living Age* 11 (20 Oct. 1855): 595. An anonymous writer for *The Corsair* describes his transformation from skeptic to avid graphologist and collector in “Autographs,” *The Corsair* (23 Mar. 1839): 2.

in Tefft's 5,000-plus autograph collection, while expounding on the unique characteristics of collectors:

The science of the autograph-collector is not without its higher and peculiar mysteries. By much experience and exercise he acquires a skilful discernment which belongs not to common eyes. He will tell you of correspondencies [sic] between the handwriting and the mental disposition of individuals about which he is rarely, if ever, mistaken. He will speak of immediately discerning, amidst a hundred new specimens, and before inspecting the signatures, those which have been written by the most eminent persons.⁵¹

Tefft allegedly boasted of his ability to identify celebrity autographs, sight unseen, from a batch of newly acquired materials. The well-trained eye easily distinguished the genius, boldness, and character of celebrity signatures from the mediocrity of their less illustrious counterparts. Indeed, the collector's "skillful discernment," the result of "much experience and exercise," is described as one of the "peculiar mysteries" of the practice. Elevating Tefft's experience and specialized knowledge into the realm of the mysterious, the author reinforces the rhetoric of magical potential surrounding autographs.

Yet while celebrity autographs and collectors like Tefft were credited with uncommon qualities, the practice of autograph collecting was an increasingly populist enterprise. No longer a pastime for only the scholarly or the wealthy, autograph collecting had become a popular hobby in the United States by the 1830s. In an anonymous review of Netherclift's *The Autograph Miscellany* reprinted in *Littell's Living Age* in 1855, the author noted, "with the earlier years of the present century the autograph-collecting hobby continued to increase in popularity among the intelligent; and by throwing out offshoots of less exacting intellectual requirements attained even the honors of fashion." The more intellectually rigorous practice of collection was associated with antiquarians, those individuals interested in "conservative activity." The reviewer for *Littell's* condescendingly acknowledges, "the

⁵¹ "A Day Among Autographs: Part 1," *Southern Rose Bud* 3.17 (18 April 1835): 129-131.

story of what History owes to the autograph collector would make a very pretty book.”⁵²

Tefft’s collection is likewise admired by the *Southern Rose Bud* correspondent as far more than a “curiosity” and is instead praised for its historical usefulness. As the *Littell’s* reviewer notes, however, the “intellectual requirements” of collecting were increasingly overlooked by amateur collectors who regarded autographs as curiosities, valued more for their insight into individual character than their historical significance.

The rising popularity of autograph collection in the antebellum United States was due, in part, to improvements in printing technology. Poe’s “Autography” series, Thane’s *British Autography*, and Netherclift’s *The Autograph Miscellany*, were successful, in part, because they provided collectors with hundreds of reproduced autographs. Poe acknowledges collectors’ unique interest in “Autography” when he names his third goal for the series: “to furnish our readers with a more accurate and at the same time a more general collection of the autographs of our *literati* than is to be found elsewhere” (Nov. 1841). Although the romantic underpinnings of graphology that privileged the direct communion of analyst and author would seemingly discount these mass-(re)produced autographs, they were still valued as accurate indices of character. Although reproduced signatures lacked the vitality of original handwriting and were therefore less valuable, analysts and collectors could nevertheless study the features of printed script for clues about the personality behind it. Handwriting samples, whether originals or reproductions, were an imaginative jumping off point for those eager to know more about the private lives and personalities of well-known figures.

Yet unlike handwriting analysts, whose interpretive skill was often attributed to genius, sympathy, or other extraordinary traits, the antebellum collector appeared to benefit

⁵² “Review of *The Autograph Miscellany*,” *Littell’s Living Age* 11 (20 Oct. 1855): 595.

more from his or her proximity to the greatness radiating from the collection. Thornton describes the autograph collectors' relationship to the specimens in his or her collection as an "almost mystical encounter with subjects...[collectors] savor[ed] the greatness that emanated from handwriting of great individuals."⁵³ As one enthusiastic collector commented in 1842 in *The New-York Mirror*: "How is the curiosity of the mind and of the eye gratified by the perusal of letters written by celebrated persons. It seems to bring us nearer to them, giving more reality to our imagination of them."⁵⁴ While the speaker here acknowledges that his relationship to "celebrated persons" is an imaginative one, he believes that celebrity handwriting can draw collector and celebrity together by laying a "real" groundwork for collectors' imagined intimacy with celebrities. Not surprisingly, the collector's pleasure in conjectured intimacy was not reciprocated by literary celebrities. As one contributor to the *Home Journal* bluntly observed:

It is one of the penalties of notoriety to be solicited incessantly for autographs...And so it comes to pass, that every mail brings to our already over-employed public man, a request, meant to be flattering, for a pen-and-ink memento of his name and talent, which forthwith goes to swell the list of some autograph hunter who...[is] only mindful of the imaginary importance they themselves acquire in the possession of this meaningless collection of names, with which no genuine associations can be connected other than those of favors unwillingly granted, and precious moments wasted uselessly.⁵⁵

The author stridently debunks the belief that any "genuine associations" between author and collector exist in "the pen-and-ink memento[s]" of literary celebrities. Collectors hoping to bask in the reflected greatness of their autograph collections are instead chastised for the "imaginary importance" they attribute both to themselves and to celebrity autographs.

⁵³ Thornton 87.

⁵⁴ "Autographs," *The New-York Mirror* 20 (17 Sept. 1842): 38.

⁵⁵ "Topics Astir—Autographs," *Home Journal* 37 (9 Sept. 1854): 2.

Antebellum collectors grew increasingly intrepid about requesting autographs directly from celebrities. Popular nineteenth-century authors shared a common opinion of those whom Louisa May Alcott termed “autograph fiends.” Dubbed by Washington Irving as the “mosquitoes of literature,” autograph collectors, many of whom pestered the objects of their desire with reams of fan mail, provoked negative responses from Sigourney, Fern, Longfellow, Whitman, and countless other literary celebrities. Pestered by autograph requests, Longfellow kept a stack of autographs on his mantel at Craigie House in anticipation of the droves of fans that appeared on his doorstep.⁵⁶ Longfellow’s pre-signed autographs were not, as the *North American Miscellany* correspondent advised, “written in a careless or confidential moment,” thereby prompting questions about the desirability of such mechanically produced signatures for collectors. Regardless, the steady barrage of requests directed at Longfellow and his contemporaries is indicative of collectors’ reputation for unscrupulous methods and a voracious appetite for specimens. In an unflattering sketch about collectors published in *The New-York Mirror* in 1836, the author mocks collectors’ greed and lack of discernment: “It is not so much the quality as to the quantity of his treasures that the true autographist looks...Napoleon Bonaparte and Colonel Pluck are all equally famous in the eyes of the autographist.”⁵⁷ The anonymous reviewer for *Littell’s Living Age* acknowledges that the collector’s “passion for acquisition” can tarnish the “honor and credit of the body politic” of collectors:

[W]e may mention the practice which has become so common of late years among collectors of a certain calibre [sic], of applying to persons of note to whom they are totally unknown for their autographs...The most difficult delinquent to deal with is

⁵⁶ Irmscher 8. While often difficult to determine how many autograph requests were made of authors, Irmscher quotes Longfellow’s astounding estimate that he had received over 20,000 letters from readers and 1300 autograph requests before the year 1854. This was, of course, nearly thirty years prior to his death in 1882, so the total number of requests in his lifetime was certainly much larger (24).

⁵⁷ “The Autograph Hunter,” *The New-York Mirror* 13 (11 Jun. 1836): 50.

the more experienced gatherer, who veils his object so carefully and does his spiriting so gently that it is almost impossible to detect him.

After a lengthy denunciation of the practices of “experienced gatherers,” the author continues with a pointed morality tale for collectors, recounting the transformation of a novice collector who “commences his career in a spirit of honorable and useful hero worship” into a jaded autographic mercenary: “as he proceeds, he becomes more experienced, and, the freshness of his enjoyment passing away, his desires become more indiscriminate and his tastes somewhat less pure. He gathers autographs of anybody, begins to traffic with *collaborateurs* of his own standard, and becomes, to say the truth, rather a troublesome person in the society in which he moves.”⁵⁸ The reviewer’s concerns about the collector’s indiscriminate desires and impure tastes are ultimately trumped by fears that an overzealous collector will discredit the practice by his unethical behavior. According to the *Littell’s* contributor, unsolicited autograph requests were more than bad manners; they threatened to turn collectors into social outcasts.

Acknowledging the “persecution” many celebrities undergo at the hands of eager collectors, one contributor to the *Overland Monthly* produced a hypothetical phrenological reading of the “autographomaniac”:

The traits of the autograph collector are peculiar. They are affected by a love for letters in the literal, and broadest literary signification. They have the bumps of acquisitiveness, persistency, patience, reverence, and marvelousness [sic] fully developed; in the event of an extra growth of one of these organs, evil results follow, casting odium on the clan. We cannot deny that among its members may be found rare instances of the toady, the bore, and the pilferer, but we can as truthfully vouch that an autographic head of harmonical [sic] design is an ornament to any community and brings renown for itself and country. Much of the ill-repute the autograph collector has won proceeds from the annoyance he occasions celebrities by applications for their writing; it amounts in many cases to persecution.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ “Review of *The Autograph Miscellany*,” *Littell’s Living Age* 11 (20 Oct 1855): 595.

⁵⁹ “Autographomania,” *Overland Monthly* 3 (October 1869): 343.

Like the *Littell's* contributor, the anonymous author identifies both the negative and positive qualities of collectors. While the “autographomaniac” may possess positive traits like patience, reverence, and a love for letters, all of which are an “ornament to any community,” the aforementioned “extra growth” of such traits conjures images of monstrosity and its ensuing “evil results.” Aside from the “toadies, bores, and pilferers,” the author specifically focuses on the “ill-repute” garnered by excessive requests for celebrity autographs. The characterization of such requests as “persecution” suggests that celebrity disdain for autograph collectors was well known. Yet while such solicitations were certainly time-consuming and irritating, the outpouring of authors’ complaints regarding autograph collectors raises questions about why these “mosquitoes of literature” inspired such vehement disapproval.

Naming collectors “the physiognomists of the world of objects,” Walter Benjamin credits collectors with a “magical” interpretive skill that allows them to “[see] through objects into their distant past.”⁶⁰ If indeed endowed with such penetrating capabilities, Benjamin’s description may explain why nineteenth-century authors often found “autograph fiends” so disconcerting. By tracing the physiognomy of an autograph, collectors, like graphologists, read beyond the product of the pen in search of the person behind it. The alleged “mystical” communion of collector, autograph, and author implies that the material autograph operated as a portal, offering those skilled in interpretation or blessed with ownership a window through which, as Benjamin observed, one could “see through objects.” Yet what were collectors hoping to discern from autographs? Contemporary sources suggest their aims were similar to those of their graphological peers; naming them the “radicals of literary antiquarianism,” one author described collectors’ “ambition to drink

⁶⁰ Benjamin 60-61.

inspiration from original fountains, from the stream of thought in the channel through which it first flowed from the author's pen."⁶¹ Despite protestations about the vulgarity of autograph requests, literary celebrities like the unnamed author of "A Modest Endeavor to Locate the Compliment in an Autograph," often unwittingly validated the magical properties associated with autographs:

If we were inclined to show up popular fallacies, we should hardly know where better to begin than with this one: *That it is a compliment to ask for an autograph*. An autograph is a manifestation—an exhibition of one's private personality...It is a lock of one's mental and moral hair, given to be speculated upon by diviners who are by no means likely to be soothsayers. It is a subtraction from our potency, cheapening all future autographs.⁶²

The author defines the autograph as "an exhibition of one's private personality" that is uncomfortably on display to "speculating" strangers. The comparison of the autograph to a lock of hair recalls Thornton's description of handwriting as a "talisman of individuality."⁶³ Similarly, the anonymous author, likely N.P. Willis, refers to his own signature as "our talismanic eight letters." Both the signature and a lock of hair are coveted because they are tokens of originality, fractions of the complete celebrity persona. Perhaps most illuminating is the author's later claim that celebrities acquiesce in autograph requests only out of politeness; the ease with which these talismans of individuality are obtained by strangers calls into question the existence of a "private personality" for public figures.

The potential for communion between strangers, made possible by the material autograph and its history as a personal artifact, its "fate" as Benjamin terms it, recalls corporeal analogies for composition used by Longfellow, Hawthorne, Poe, Fern, Whitman,

⁶¹ "Autographomania" 342.

⁶² "A Modest Endeavor to Locate the Compliment in an Autograph," *Home Journal* 16 (19 April 1851): 2.

⁶³ Thornton 88. Thornton describes the "magical" qualities of the autograph, citing it as a "talisman of individuality in more than a symbolic sense," and thus both desired and withheld (88).

and many others. In *Mosses from an Old Manse*, Hawthorne expressed his frustration that authors were expected to “serve up their hearts delicately fried, with a side of brain sauce” in their published work. In an 1835 journal entry, Longfellow expressed his condemnation of his contemporaries who “wrote as if a goose quill was in their brains.” Writing to Frederick Thomas, Poe also equated the product of his pen to his mind: “To coin one’s brain into silver, at the nod of a master, is to my thinking, the hardest task in the world.”⁶⁴ Hawthorne, Longfellow, and Poe each speak to McGill’s notion of the “phantom presence” of authorial subjectivity that perfumes the printed page, imbuing the sterile print surface with an awareness that the original text was the product of hand, body, and brain, not simply machine.⁶⁵ Images of mangled and grotesque authorial bodies trapped in their texts signal the discomfort many authors felt with the degree of personal accessibility they were expected to provide their readers. Authorial analogies of physical entrapment in print are particularly compelling when one considers the reproduced autographs featured in the “Autography” series. The autographs were unmistakable emblems of individuality in the midst of a largely depersonalized print public sphere. Reproduced autographs transform the printed page into an intimate topography of authorial presence, reminding readers of the person behind the pen and exposing authors to the conjectures and solicitations of strangers.

If printed texts could be imbued with the ghostly presence of authors, then handwriting can be understood as the “reification of self in script.”⁶⁶ While authors like Hawthorne, Longfellow, and Poe complained about pressures to reveal themselves in their published works, autograph solicitations represented a much more direct invasion of privacy.

⁶⁴ Nathaniel Hawthorne, *Mosses from an Old Manse* (New York: Wiley and Putnam, 1846) 29; Longfellow journal entry for 27 September 1835 quoted in Irmscher 49; Poe to Thomas, quoted in Quinn 323.

⁶⁵ McGill 177.

⁶⁶ Thornton 88.

The *Home Journal* contributor's comparison of an autograph to "a lock of one's mental and moral hair" immediately calls to mind both the potential for violation—"The Rape of the (Autographic) Lock," so to speak—and more modern televised representations of hair as the crime scene investigator's holy grail, a tiny packet of DNA that literally encodes identity. Although both anachronistic, such references draw attention to the symbolic import of hair as a marker of personal identity and shed light on why autograph requests from strangers assumed a more sinister aspect for many antebellum literary celebrities. The common graphological explanation that character "oozed" through the fingertips onto the printed page similarly recalls the familiar metaphorical equation of blood and ink. Irving's characterization of collectors as the "mosquitoes of literature," for example, conjures images of small-scale blood predators. By figuratively substituting the fluid of personal transmission from ink to blood, the autograph request assumes a predatory aspect, threatening a violation of one's self and turning autograph collectors into "autograph vampires."⁶⁷ Hood refers to the dangerous possibilities of the autograph when he questions the fictional collector: "Would [the gentleman] prefer [the autograph] in red ink or black—or suppose he had it in sympathetic, so that he could draw me out when he pleased?"⁶⁸ As with his allusion to herbal-autographic compounds, Hood references the magical properties associated with autographs; an autograph signed in blood, or "sympathetic," would hold powerful potential for communion between author, collector, and object. According to Hood, the owner of an autograph signed in blood would be able to "draw out" the author "whenever he pleased," an unpleasant prospect for any celebrity. The stakes are clear. If, as analysts and collectors

⁶⁷ Both Thornton and Amelia Peck characterize autograph collectors as "vampires." According to Peck: "among some harried authors, autograph collectors were almost equated with vampires, eager to magically enlarge their own being by sapping the energy of others" (266). See Amelia Peck, "'A Marvel of Woman's Ingenious and Intellectual Industry': The Adeline Harris Sears Autograph Quilt," *Metropolitan Museum Journal* 33 (1998): 263-290.

⁶⁸ Hood 70.

believed, character oozed onto the page, such self-revelation posed a threat to more than the privacy of authors. Thornton compares being trapped by an autograph hunter to having a visitor invade one's bedroom; such an act constitutes an invasion not just of one's privacy, but an invasion of one's own person, as well.⁶⁹ Moreover, as the *Home Journal* contributor argues, signing autographs reduced the "potency" of authors, conjuring comparisons of autograph signings and bloodletting, both of which diminished "potency" through the loss of vital fluid, whether blood or ink.

Clearly direct autograph solicitations were more than an annoyance to public figures; the analytical weight associated with handwriting transformed the two-dimensional autograph into a more fluid marker of identity and personality. The "strange" power Hawthorne attributes to handwriting transforms the autograph into an "identity of paper and ink" which threatened to reveal more than public figures cared to share. Yet Hawthorne's description also draws attention to the material aspects of the autograph and underscores the unique nature of the woodcut engravings in Poe's "Autography" series. Hood, for example, discourses at length about the material possibilities of autographs, naming a dizzying array of items like thread, food, bark, dust, smoke, and a hot poker as material mediums for autographic transmission. Yet, in his closing remarks he first acknowledges and then ignores collectors' preference for handwritten autographs: "I presume, to conclude, that you want only a common pen ink-and-paper autograph; and in the absence of any particular directions for its transmission,—for instance, by a carrier-pigeon—or in a fire-balloon—or set adrift in a bottle—or per wagon...I think the best way will be to send it to you in *print*. I am sir, your most obedient servant, Thomas Hood."⁷⁰

⁶⁹ Thornton 88.

⁷⁰ Hood 70.

Playing with a substitution of printers' ink in the "ink-and-paper autograph," Hood provides a typeface "signature" to collectors. In contrast to Hood's mockingly impersonal signature, the woodcut autographs in Poe's "Autography" series represent a ingenious marriage of mass-production and reproduction; they allowed thousands of readers to analyze autographs that would otherwise need to be procured individually while at the same time freeing celebrities from direct requests.

Hood's extensive commentary about the material possibilities of the autograph predates one innovative method of autograph collection that would certainly have attracted his critical ire. In 1856, a young woman from Rhode Island named Adeline Harris (Sears) (1839-1931) began to solicit autographs for an autograph quilt which, when completed, featured 360 autographs from almost every major mid-nineteenth century American politician, author, editor, artist, scientist, and minister [See Figure 3.12-3.13]. Sears' quilt was a "tumbling blocks" pattern composed of small, white, diamond-shaped silk pieces signed in ink by celebrities like Harriet Beecher Stowe, Julia Ward Howe, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Lydia Sigourney, Henry Ward Beecher, Rembrandt Peale, Wendell Phillips, and Hiram Powers. Sears accumulated autographs from political figures like Abraham Lincoln and Martin Van Buren personally during family stays in Washington, but she acquired most of the autographs through mailed solicitations. Over a span of twenty years Sears worked on the autograph quilt, pairing the white autograph diamonds with brightly colored silk diamonds cut from her dresses, one of which she wore to Lincoln's inaugural ball.⁷¹ Sears attracted the attention of Sarah Josepha Hale when she mailed one of the silk diamonds to the *Godey's* literary editor. Hale complied with Sears' request and went on to publish an article about her quilt project, "Autograph Bedquilt" (April 1864), and a plan for

⁷¹ Peck 267. According to Peck, Sears danced with Lincoln at his inaugural ball.

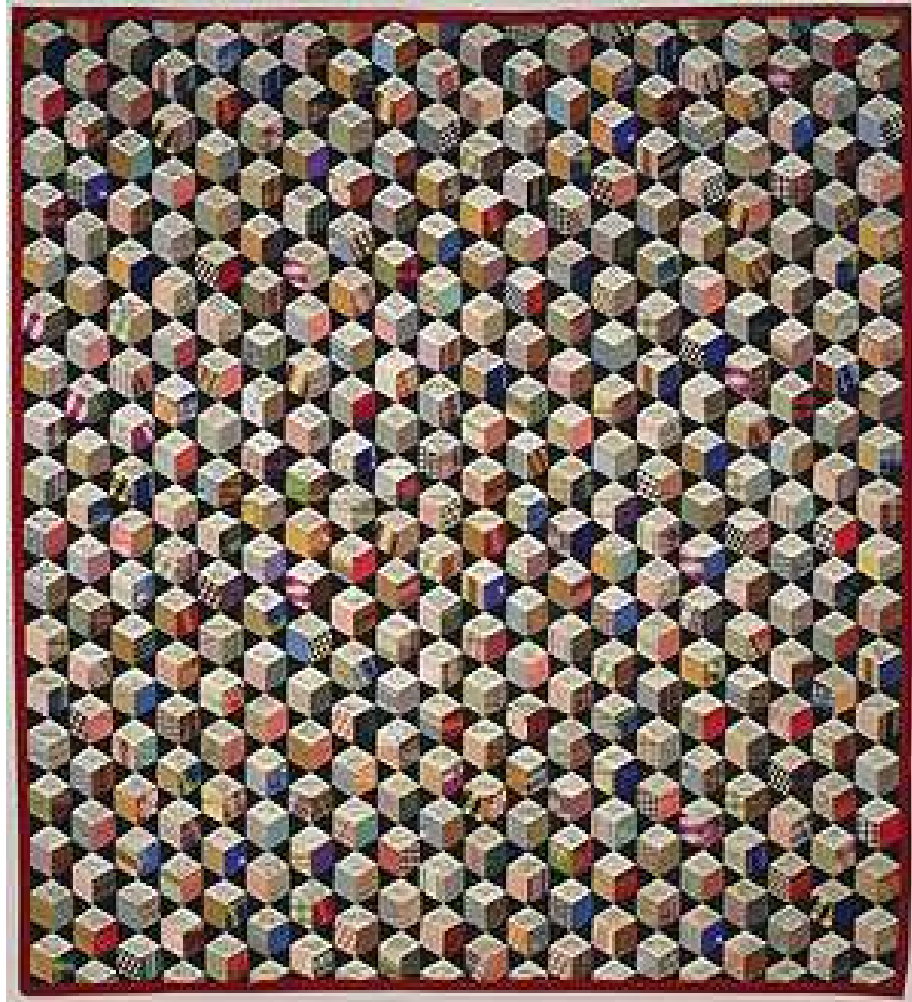


Fig. 3.12: Autograph quilt, ca. 1856-62, Adeline Harris Sears. Silk with inked signatures; 77 x 80 in. (195.6 x 203.2 cm). From the Metropolitan Museum of Art collection of American Decorative Arts

similar quilt, “Plan for an Autograph Quilt” (July 1864), in *Godey’s*. Although she does not name Sears, referring only to “a young lady of Rhode Island,” Hale claims that Sears’ initial letter revealed “the enthusiasm of a poetical temperament working out a grand invention that is to be a new pleasure and blessing to the world...Who knows but in future ages, her work may be looked at like the Bayeux Tapestry, not only as a marvel of woman’s ingenious and intellectual industry, but as affording an idea of the civilization of our times, and giving a

notion of the persons as estimated in history.”⁷² The sheer scope of the completed quilt and the number of celebrities included certainly renders it a “marvel” of ingenuity and industry. Yet Hale’s predictions regarding the future significance of the autograph quilt also proved accurate; now hanging in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Sears’ creative collaboration of the art of quilting and autograph collecting reveals much to us about those persons “esteemed” by Sears and her contemporaries during the mid-nineteenth century.

Sears’ autograph quilt represents a unique twist on the popular art of signature or album quilting in the nineteenth century.⁷³ These quilts were composed of pieces either designed or signed by ordinary members of a family or community group to commemorate marriages, births, and other major life events. Adeline Harris Sears’ quilt project is a sharp departure from these creative markers of communal and familial identity: her autograph quilt is composed nearly exclusively of signatures from celebrities she had never met. While more traditional signature quilts were physical representations of unity, often pieced together at small quilting parties, Sears worked alone for nearly twenty years to complete her autograph quilt. Her only “collaborators” were the authors, editors, artists, politicians, and ministers who returned the small diamond panes to Sears, autographed in indelible ink. As a result, Sears’ celebrity autograph quilt is composed of tokens from the cultural elite, rather than intimate reminders of family ties, the hallmark of traditional signature quilts.

If Sears’ autograph collection had been reproduced, it would have far surpassed Poe’s “Autography” series as the most complete set of American autographs in print. The

⁷² Sarah Josepha Hale, “Autograph Bedquilt,” *Godey’s Lady’s Book* 68 (April 1864): 396.

⁷³ According to Peck, no other existing signature or autograph quilt matches Sears’ in either number of signatures or preservation quality. Peck also cites Hale’s interest and subsequent publications about the quilt as a marker of its uniqueness. For more on the tradition of signature quilts in nineteenth-century America, see Dilys Blum and Jack L. Lindsey, “Nineteenth-Century Applique Quilts,” *Philadelphia Museum of Art Bulletin* v85 n363/365 (Autumn 1989): 1-45.



Fig. 3.13: Detail from Autograph quilt, ca. 1856-62, Adeline Harris Sears. Silk with inked signatures; 77 x 80 in. (195.6 x 203.2 cm). From the Metropolitan Museum of Art collection of American Decorative Arts

private, domestic nature of the quilt precluded such a distinction, but also raises questions about the material medium of Sears' collection. Referring to Hale's 1864 "Plan for an Autograph Quilt," the anonymous author of "Autographomania" commented, "No doubt some mystic influence would charm the sleeper under such a spread."⁷⁴ Likely with tongue firmly in cheek, the author draws upon the prevalent belief in the "mystical" properties of autographs and, consequently, their ability to "charm" those who slept under such a unique autograph quilt. The shared philosophy of chirographers and collectors, namely that autographs were "talismans" of individuality, begs further questioning about the unique

⁷⁴ "Autographomania" 349.

medium and function of Sears' autographic enterprise. Although the anonymous author humorously focuses on the charmed sleeper, it is equally important to consider what, or perhaps more accurately, who, the owner of an autograph quilt is, in fact, sleeping with? With 360 "identit[ies] of paper and ink," or in this case "fabric and ink," teeming on the surface of Sears' quilt, the solitary bed is transformed into a crowded panoply of autographic transmission.⁷⁵

Despite such jests about the "mystical" influence of the autograph quilt, Hale was enthusiastic about Sears' endeavor. After praising the manual skills needed to complete the project, Hale reflects on:

The intellectual part, the taste to assort colors and to make the appearance what it ought to be, where so many hundreds of shades are to be matched and suited to each other. After that we rise to the moral, when human deeds are to live in names, the consideration of the celebrities, who are to be placed each, the centre of his or her own circle! To do this well requires a knowledge of books and life, and an instinctive sense of the fitness of things, so as to assign each name its suitable place in this galaxy of stars or diamonds."⁷⁶

Sears' autograph quilt is transformed into a striking example of cultural criticism through Hale's recognition of the aesthetic discernment and cultural proficiency required to complete such a project. In her analysis of the autograph quilt, Amelia Peck argues that the final product was the result of Sears' complex organizational choices aimed at "assign[ing] each name its suitable place"; Sears organized the autographs into clusters according to the shared profession, cultural impact and influence, and historical chronology of the contributors. Sears purposely grouped many women authors together, for example, signaling her recognition of their influences upon one another and their shared impact on American letters.

⁷⁵ Louisa May Alcott refers to a similar collection of celebrity artifacts in *Jo's Boys*, satirizing a woman who is putting together a quilt made from pieces of authors' clothing (discussed in chapter 5).

⁷⁶ Hale, "Autograph Bedquilt" 369.

Hale's heralded "knowledge of books and life, and an instinctive sense of the fitness of things," crucial to the completion of the quilt, is also an apt description of the art of criticism. Despite vast differences in intended audience and composition, both Sears and Poe were invested in interpreting the autographs they amassed according to their "instinctive sense of the fitness of things." Sears' education and familiarity with the major cultural developments of her era informed her choices for selection and organization in her quilt just as Poe's commitment to assessing his literary contemporaries motivated his choices in "Autography." Both "Autography" and the autograph quilt are also notable for their unabashed focus on celebrities and their methods for translating the public nature of celebrity into a more familiar, intimate setting using the tools of graphology and quilting. Both projects are also informed by hybrid methodologies that accommodated literary criticism, graphology, and rampant speculation in Poe's case and aesthetic sensibility, manual dexterity, and celebrity expertise on the part of Sears. Finally, both Poe's critical commentary on the status of antebellum letters and Sears' curatorial efforts for her quilt were efforts to interpret autographs. Unlike the engraved images of authors featured in "Godey's Portrait Gallery" and *Graham's* magazine's "Our Contributors" series, autographs were consistently believed to require articulation and interpretation. Through their creative acts of analysis, both Sears and Poe uphold, perhaps unconsciously, the mysterious and at times magical faculties of Hawthorne's strangely powerful "identity of paper and ink."

Chapter 3

Writing with Invisible Ink: Hawthorne and His Prefaces

“Let [Hawthorne] mend his pen, get a bottle of visible ink, come out from the Old Manse, cut Mr. Alcott, hang (if possible) the editor of the ‘Dial,’ and throw out of the window to the pigs all his odd numbers of the *North American Review*.”

-Edgar Allan Poe, *Godey's Lady's Book* (November 1847)

“The book, if you would see anything in it, requires to be read in the clear, brown twilight atmosphere in which it was written; if opened in the sunshine, it is apt to look exceedingly like a volume of blank pages.”

-Nathaniel Hawthorne, Preface to *Twice Told Tales*, 2nd ed. (1851)

Nathaniel Hawthorne's preface to *Mosses from an Old Manse* (1846) opens, rather incongruously, with a funeral scene: “Between two tall gate-posts of rough-hewn stone...we beheld the gray front of the old parsonage, terminating the vista of an avenue of black-ash trees. It was now a twelvemonth since the funeral procession of the venerable clergyman, its last inhabitant, had turned from that gate-way towards the village burying-ground.”¹ For a preface that intends to “make the reader acquainted with [the author's] abode,” as the subtitle announces, these opening images of a funeral procession moving past a weathered gray parsonage surrounded by phalanxes of looming trees are far from welcoming. By opening the preface with a lengthy consideration of the provenance of the Old Manse, Hawthorne takes pains to distinguish himself from past inhabitants, while also demanding the clergyman's privilege of isolation and contemplation; after all, he, too, had made the drama of the human soul his business. Indeed, Hawthorne revels in the ideality of the Manse for those who share the

¹ Nathaniel Hawthorne, *Tales and Sketches Including Twice-Told Tales, Mosses from an Old Manse, and The Snow-Image* (New York: The Library of America, 1996). All subsequent references will be included parenthetically in the text.

clergyman's need for introspection: "In its near retirement, and accessible seclusion, it was the very spot for the residence of a clergyman; a man not estranged from human life, yet enveloped, in the midst of it, with a veil woven of intermingled gloom and brightness" (1123). In his description of a man "not estranged from human life," but nonetheless "enveloped, in the midst of it, with a veil woven of intermingled gloom and brightness," Hawthorne uses his reflections about a clergyman's needs to articulate his own, painting himself and his imagined predecessors as occupants of a liminal space both connected to humanity and divorced from its demands.² The Manse represented a contemplative space whose proximity to Concord, transcendental wayfarers, Revolutionary war history, and past generations of Native American settlers offered an alluring possibility for connection to people and ideas, a possibility all the more enticing because such threads to past and present could be shut out by Hawthorne's nearly ubiquitous prefatory veil. Most importantly, however, the opening reverie in "The Old Manse" provides one of the clearest articulations of Hawthorne's own desired position as an author in the public sphere.³ Although he cloaks his glorification of the Manse's "near retirement and accessible seclusion" under his extended rumination about his clerical predecessors, the paradoxical "farness" described corresponds to Hawthorne's often irreconcilable desires for public

² Just as he craves a liminal position that is both connected to humanity and divorced from its demands, Hawthorne also postures about and reflects upon his own supposed laziness when describing the stream: "while all things else are compelled to subserve some useful purpose, it idles its sluggish life away, in lazy liberty, without turning a solitary spindle, or affording even water-power enough to grind the corn that grows upon its banks" (1126).

³ Michael Newbury argues that Hawthorne's anxieties about popular production are rooted in his need to disassociate his "craft" from the "immodesty" and "marketing of cheap emotions" that he recognized in the popular literature of the day (50). Newbury is particularly interested in how Hawthorne uses metaphors of industrial production and mindless creation to characterize the works of popular women writers: "For Hawthorne at a purely personal level, the pushing of polarities of market-oriented (industrial) and artistic (artisanal) literary production clearly served a compensatory function that allowed him to construct or imagine an idealized version of his own literary career along several axes of difference See Michael Newbury, *Figuring Authorship in Antebellum America* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997).

recognition and impervious privacy.⁴ Like the Rev. Hooper in “The Minister’s Black Veil,” Hawthorne chooses to isolate himself from the public whilst moving among them, practicing and perfecting a form of what Diana Fuss terms “social solitude” in his authorial persona.⁵

Hawthorne’s veiled public man in “The Old Manse” is also an apt characterization of how Hawthorne used his prefaces to circulate a carefully constructed authorial persona that he self-consciously, and at times proudly, used to rebuff readers’ assumptions of familiarity. Indeed, the preface offered a unique space in which Hawthorne crafted a complicated and at times contradictory set of public identities: “the obscurest man of letters in America” in *Twice-Told Tales*, the officious, rambling host who nevertheless “veils his face” in *Mosses from an Old Manse*, the self-deprecating Monsieur de l’Aubepine in “Rappacini’s Daughter,” the reluctant antiquarian in “The Custom House,” the world-weary, established author in *The Snow-Image*, and an author courting a “lost Public” in *The Marble Faun*. Yet his vexed quest for recognition and success prevented the seclusion from worldly affairs often idealized in his prefaces. While he acknowledged the unique narrative and spatial qualities that enabled prefaces to function as bridges between author, reader, and text—in his preface to *The Snow-Image* he describes his intent to use prefaces “to pave the reader’s way into the interior edifice of a book,” for example—Hawthorne’s prefaces consistently function as elaborate sleight-of-hand devices (1154). They acknowledge readers’ desire to learn about his life, his habits, and his mind, and in

⁴ Hawthorne characteristically mocked his own desire for fame in “The Custom House,” acknowledging “it has been as dear an object as any, in my literary efforts, to be of some importance in [the] eyes [of his townsfolk]” (43). In that preface, he renounces his search for fame, only to realize it in a different, and unpleasant, way: “No longer seeking nor caring that my name should be blazoned abroad on title pages, I smiled to think that it had now another kind of vogue. The Custom-House marker imprinted it, with a stencil and black paint, on pepper-bags, and baskets of annatto, and cigar-boxes, and bales of all kinds of dutiable merchandise... Borne on such queer vehicle of fame, a knowledge of my existence, so far as a name conveys it, was carried where it had never been before, and, I hope, will never go again” (28). Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, ed. Nina Baym (New York: Penguin Books, 1986). Subsequent references will be included parenthetically in the text (SL).

⁵ Clark Davis productively questions the relationship between Hooper and Hawthorne in *Hawthorne’s Shyness: Ethics, Politics, and the Question of Engagement* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005) 56-62.

many cases proceed with a narrative tour of his home, workplace, or study; yet nearly all of his prefaces conclude with exultant claims of impenetrable privacy and inaccessibility that vociferously deny readers any real insight into the figure wielding the pen.

“Writing with Invisible Ink: Hawthorne and his Prefaces,” explores Hawthorne’s use of prefaces to both invite and repel readers’ emotional attachments to his authorial persona. The concluding paragraphs of “The Old Manse,” for example, abruptly reject the very frame he has used to structure the preface, that of host and reader touring his familiar haunts:

Has the reader gone wandering, hand in hand with me, through the inner passages of my being, and have we groped together into all its chambers, and examined their treasures or their rubbish? Not so...So far as I am a man of really individual attributes, I veil my face; nor am I, nor have ever been, one of those supremely hospitable people, who serve up their own hearts delicately fried, with brain-sauce, as a tidbit for their beloved public” (1147).

The preface is fraught with contradictions: in it he invites readers for an intimate tour, but insists on donning a veil to cover his “true” self; he scorns celebrities who court the reading public, yet he also covets popular attention; he abruptly rejects his imagined reader, but later invites him into his private study. The author toys with readers’ desire for intimate exchange, like a cat with a mouse, by practicing an art of deceptive intimacy in his prefaces that was meant to stimulate but rarely satisfy. He boasts as much in a letter to longtime friend Horatio Bridge: “[Despite] whatever appearance of confidential intimacy, I have been especially careful to make no disclosures respecting myself which the most indifferent observer might not have been acquainted with, and which I was not perfectly willing that my worst enemy should know” (1154). Hawthorne proudly repackages the humdrum, the frothy, the insubstantial information available to any “indifferent observer” into prefaces that have an “appearance of confidential intimacy.” Yet, the master stroke is that Hawthorne’s “confession” of falsified intimacy to Bridge is itself the preface to his collection *The Snow-Image*. Again, the genre (the preface) and its content (a personal letter) insinuate a promise of authorial exposure that is not simply denied; it

is mockingly rejected. In spite of this, the prefaces do not merely snub readers; he also used them as a bully pulpit to inveigh against the inherent threat posed by reading practices that sought to find the author in his texts. Hawthorne argued that readers' imagined constructions of himself could corrupt his own identity; well-known assessments of Hawthorne's work and his personality by contemporaries Herman Melville, Edgar Allan Poe, Evert Duyckinck, and George William Curtis illustrate the degree to which even privileged author-critics attempted to use texts as tunnels into authorial consciousness. Finally, reading his prefaces as spaces of ambivalent self-promotion, I link this genre to the developing trend of illustrated guidebooks to author's homes and studies popularized in the 1850s. By considering both the preface and the guidebook spatially, the chapter analyzes the process of crafting an authorial persona in the "public interiority" of both a published preface and a published domestic interior.

"The autobiographical impulse" in "The Old Manse" and "The Custom House"

Nathaniel Hawthorne's hospitality in "The Old Manse" is exhausting. Despite initial promises to guide readers on a tour of his home, the bulk of the preface consists of a vigorous walking tour through the land surrounding the Manse. Next to "The Custom House" the preface to *Mosses from an Old Manse* is the author's most extended prefatory reverie, and, like "The Custom House," it is structured around Hawthorne's physical movements through rooms, interiors, and the exterior spaces that surround them. It is not surprising that he dons the veil in each of these masterful manipulations of authorial identity; it is as if time spent even in the refracted glare of the published preface was dazzling. His prefatory veil in "The Old Manse" is part of his larger concern throughout the piece with outsides and insides, and, by extension, with who has permission to enter public and private spaces. This policing of boundaries signals Hawthorne's own awareness of and discomfort with the reading public he sought to engage; yet,

Hawthorne's rhetoric of authorial veiling also speaks to a persistent desire, as Clark Davis observes, "to vanish from his own attempt to present himself."⁶ Hawthorne's self-described



Fig. 4.1: Sketch of the Old Manse. Included in *Homes of American Authors*. New York: G.P. Putnam and Co.: 1853. Image courtesy of the New York Public Library

"autobiographical" prefaces practice an uneasy balance of authorial presence and absence, as the author navigates the possibilities for control and dangers of exposure that characterize the preface as a genre.⁷ He is engaged, as Edwin Haviland Miller aptly describes, in a game of hide-and-seek with readers, denying his presence in an autobiographical preface.⁸

⁶ Davis 3.

⁷ John Pearson asserts that the preface is a contentious narrative space, often overrun by competing demands and authorial needs. It can be both a place for author-reader exchange, a place to exert control over the text, or an opportunity to present ideal readings of the text. As Pearson writes, the preface can be a space for self-conscious revelation: "The copious relations between preface and prefaced narrative construct a dialogic discourse that defines the preface and the narrative as responses to one another that rely upon a constant play

In a mischievous wordplay, Hawthorne's authorial host takes his reader on what he calls a "devious track" through the environs of the Manse (1127). In one sense, of course, he is confessing to the extended perambulations and soliloquies that characterize his narrative "tour"; he has, in fact, "deviated" from his intended pathway. Yet again, Hawthorne's "devious track" also draws attention to his deliberately circuitous route and his larger program of self-concealment. Hawthorne-as-host appears hesitant to enter the Manse, more comfortable remaining outdoors and reminiscing about Revolutionary War legends, the course of the river, or the delights of limited physical labor in the garden. Even as the narrator reminds the readers of the house and gestures towards it, he withdraws again: "The Old Manse! We had almost forgotten it, but will return thither through the orchard...." (1130). The host again "deviates" from this intention by providing an exhaustive discussion of the orchard's history and his delight in the garden he has cultivated. Is Hawthorne's extensive praise of the summer squash, his most prolific crop, evidence of a Romantic communion with nature? Perhaps. Is his delight with the growth of his garden evidence of this newlywed's "first flush of fatherhood"?⁹ Likely. Yet, his determination to commission a pair of vases modeled on the beauty of his summer squash seems to playfully verge on the absurd; Hawthorne, like Scheherazade spinning a tale, is spinning out his tour to forestall entrance to his home. Again, Hawthorne acknowledges that both his tour and his narrative have meandered: "what with the river, the battle-field, the orchard, and the garden, the reader begins to despair of finding his way back into the old Manse" (1133).

or exchange of self and other, of writer and reader" (25). It can also, in contrast, act as "the site in which the rights of authorship are claimed and the power to authorize the text is assumed" (27). See John H. Pearson, *The Prefaces of Henry James: Framing the Modern Reader* (Philadelphia: The University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997).

⁸ Edwin Haviland Miller, *Salem is My Dwelling Place: A Life of Nathaniel Hawthorne* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1991) 247-248.

⁹ Brenda Wineapple notes that Emerson sent Thoreau to plant a garden for his tenants, the newlywed Hawthornes. See Brenda Wineapple, *Hawthorne: A Life* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 2003) 160-161. Hawthorne makes no mention of Thoreau's role in the garden, but does favorably contrast his 2-3 hours of daily labor in the garden with his time spent at Brook Farm.

Hawthorne eventually accompanies his reader into the garret in order to reflect on a decrepit library of theological texts; yet as the narrative path of “The Old Manse” illustrates, he is hesitant, perhaps even resistant, to relinquish the outdoors. After denying readers access to “the inner passages of my being” in the final, robust denial of communion that closes the preface, Hawthorne imagines a new space for author-reader interaction: “we have been standing on the green sward, but just within the cavern’s mouth, where the common sunshine is free to penetrate, and where every footstep is free to come” (1147). Readers are allowed to come tantalizingly close to the caverns of Hawthorne’s mind, but are firmly repositioned to a common, open, sun-drenched public space, much as Hawthorne does with his “devious tour” in “The Old Manse.” Hawthorne’s invocation of a sunny space for interaction is particularly intriguing in light of later injunctions about the reading of his works. In the 1851 preface to the second edition of *Twice Told Tales*, Hawthorne famously cautioned that his works were best read in a dusky, partial twilight; in direct sunlight, he hints, words and author may disappear from the page altogether.

Of course, Hawthorne does invite his reader-guest into the Manse, going so far, in the final paragraph, to “usher” his guest into his personal study: “There, after seating him in an antique elbow chair, an heirloom of the house, I take forth a roll of manuscript, and intreat [sic] his attention to the following tales:—an act of personal inhospitality, however, which I never was guilty of, nor ever will be, even to my worst enemy” (1149). Despite his solicitation over his imagined guest, Hawthorne’s (in)hospitality is called into question; is he welcoming friend or enemy? The prefatory frame invites the reader to pull up a comfortable chair in the Manse and read the “roll of manuscript,” a presumption he would not impose upon even his “worst enemy.” Yet while Hawthorne’s authorial modesty about subjecting his guest to his manuscript is certainly in keeping with contemporary conventions, his

repeated linkage of audiences and enemies is notable. In the preface to *The Snow-Image*, the letter to Bridge, he argues that despite appearances of intimacy in his published works, “I have been especially careful to make no disclosures respecting myself which the most indifferent observer might not have been acquainted with, and which I was not perfectly willing that my worst enemy should know” (1154). Not exactly enemies, but certainly not friends, audiences appear to be guilty by association; he is clear that published information revealed in his prefaces is fit to be shared with antagonists only because it is insipid, unobjectionable, and incapable of coming back to haunt him.

However, Hawthorne’s invitation at the end of “The Old Manse” is only proffered after he performs a series of strenuous narrative gymnastics to reinforce his distance from readers. Immediately before welcoming the reader as his guest, Hawthorne writes: “My conscience, however, does not reproach me with betraying anything too sacredly individual to be revealed by a human spirit, to its brother or sister spirit” (1147). He expressly backs away from exposure and intimacy by claiming a commonality of experience and couching his flirtation with authorial exposure as a matter of conscience, a matter he resolves by transforming this act of communication into an etherealized exchange. After soothing his conscience, he proceeds with an extended rumination on the limitations of language to capture and convey the depths and contours of a mind vigorously at work:

How narrow—how shallow and scanty too—is the stream of thought that has been flowing from my pen, compared with the broad tide of dim emotions, ideas, and associations, which swell around me from the portion of my existence! How little have I told!—and, of that little, how almost nothing is even tinged with any quality that makes it exclusively my own!” (1147).

Hawthorne characterizes his production as shallow, scanty, and generic in the face of the “broad tide” and “swell” of intellectual and emotional possibility within. What Hawthorne leaves tantalizingly ambiguous is whether the shallowness of his preface was intentional or unavoidable.

His exultant declaration “how little I have told!” seems almost a verbalized sigh of relief from an author-narrator relieved at his own near escape with exposure. Moreover, he claims not only to have withheld the “broad swell” of individuality, but to have shared nothing that is, in fact, unique: “nothing is even tinged with any quality that makes it exclusively my own!”

Hawthorne is undoubtedly relieved that he is not exposed to the same Public (as he capitalizes it) that he later hesitantly describes as “friends,” however, this exultation also contains a sense of wonder about the inability to capture that “tide of emotions, ideas and associations” that surround and characterize him.

His final assumption of a veil is yet another attempt to avoid betraying “anything too sacredly individual” to his audience, again denying entrance into another privileged interior: “So far as I am a man of really individual attributes, I veil my face; nor am I, nor have ever been, one of those supremely hospitable people, who serve up their own hearts delicately fried, with brain-sauce, as a tidbit for their beloved public” (1147). Returning to his framing device, the hospitable host, Hawthorne rejects the “supreme hospitality” of his literary peers who serve themselves up to a devouring public. A reluctant, recalcitrant host, Hawthorne refuses to acquaint readers with his “inner passages” and uses the veil to protect his “really individual attributes”; he explicitly rejects any illusion of shared intimacy that his prefatory tour could invoke. It is no wonder, then, that he does not invite readers to a banquet of authorial heart and brain; instead, readers are largely kept outside—in the orchard, at the cavern’s mouth—where all, even enemies, may tread.

“The Old Manse” is Hawthorne’s attempt to define and separate both the literary and extra-literary aspects of his text. In his analysis of Henry James’ New York Edition prefaces, John H. Pearson contends that James was able to “make himself felt as both presence and absence” in the New York Editions; while there are many differences in their approaches to

prefaces, the Jamesian paradox of simultaneous presence and absence characterizes Hawthorne's prefatory position, as well.¹⁰ Hawthorne uses the preface to position the Old Manse and its surrounding landscape as an important inspiration for his literary production, as he explains in his hesitant conclusion: "And now, I begin to feel—and perhaps should have sooner felt—that we have talked enough of the old Manse. Mine honored reader, it may be, will vilify the poor author as an egotist, for babbling through so many pages about a moss-grown country parsonage, and his life within its walls, and on the river, and in the woods,—and the influences that wrought upon him, from all these sources" (1147). An unlikely egotist, Hawthorne clearly establishes his "presence" in the Manse and the significance of "his life within its walls, and on the river, and in the woods" on his literary production. Yet Hawthorne's preface also quite literally asserts his absence from this privileged space, as well. After establishing the spatial significance of the house and its land, Hawthorne literally removes himself: "Providence took me by the hand, and—an oddity of dispensation which, I trust, there is no irreverence in smiling at—has led me, as the newspapers announce while I am writing, from the Old Manse into a Custom House! As a storyteller, I have often contrived strange vicissitudes for my imaginary personages, but none like this" (1148). Hawthorne's somewhat rueful reflection on the dispensation of Providence and his future at the Custom House does not, indeed cannot, mention his own active campaign for the position. As Wineapple notes, it would admit, "that he could never tolerate Eden for too long anyway [and] that the Custom House was a retreat no less than the Manse."¹¹ Nonetheless, readers tempted to visit Concord for a glimpse of Hawthorne in his Old Manse, as they were to visit the Louisa May Alcott's home nearly twenty

¹⁰ Pearson 25-27. As Pearson notes, the unique spatial quality of the preface (attached to a novel but not part of the narrative), allows it to have multiple functions. It can be used to tell the story of its production, articulate ideal readings, hide information, reveal information, or mythologize its creator.

¹¹ Wineapple 193.

years later, were stymied; by the time of publication, the Hawthornes no longer lived in their newlywed paradise of the Old Manse.

Just as he foreshadows his time at the Custom House, the opening lines of his preface to *The Scarlet Letter* refer readers back to “The Old Manse” and the uncharacteristic “autobiographical impulse” that both prefaces share:

It is a little remarkable, that—though disinclined to talk overmuch of myself and my affairs at the fireside, and to my personal friends—an autobiographical impulse should twice in my life have taken possession of me, in addressing the public. The first time was three or four years since, when I favored the reader—inexcusably, and for no earthly reason, that either the indulgent reader or the intrusive author could imagine—with a description of my way of life in the deep quietude of an Old Manse. And now—because, beyond my deserts, I was happy enough to find a listener or two on the former occasion—I again seize the public by the button, and talk of my three years’ experience in a Custom-House” (SL 7).

Hawthorne’s opening lines differ significantly from the imagined funeral scene that opens “The Old Manse,” but his own self-described wonderment at his indiscretion remains the same. The stage is effectively set: Hawthorne will use “The Custom House” to do that which he is “disinclined” to do even at his own fireside; he will “seize the public by the button” and describe himself and his experience at the Custom House to a group of privileged readers. In another witty wordplay, Hawthorne reverses his adjectives when describing “the intrusive author” who takes advantage of “the indulgent reader’s” patience by sharing personal details. Critical of the personal revelations made by his literary peers and the public’s demand for private intercourse with authors through print, Hawthorne’s “intrusion” upon an “indulgent” reading public is one he knows will be forgiven.

Yet despite such confidence, Hawthorne continues to defend and explain his autobiographical tendency in the preface. First, he explicitly distinguishes himself from those who indecorously bare all in their writing: “some authors, indeed, . . . indulge themselves in such confidential depths of revelation as could fittingly be addressed, only and

exclusively, to the one heart and mind of perfect sympathy.” These same confidential depths probed by authors in print are akin to the “fried hearts and brain-sauce” he declined to provide his guests in “The Old Manse.” Those who publish to the masses what should only be shared with the “one” practice a kind of reckless intimacy with strangers that Hawthorne claims to be “scarcely decorous.” In contrast, Hawthorne constructs an imaginary, ambiguous audience to rescue him from any indecorous self-revelation: “it may be pardonable to imagine that a friend, a kind and apprehensive, though not the closest friend, is listening to our talk; and then, a native reserve being thawed by this genial consciousness, we may prate of the circumstances that lie around us, and even of ourself, but still keep the innermost Me behind its veil” (*SL* 7). Again, Hawthorne practices limited hospitality. Imagining readers as friendly, kind, and apprehensive, but firm in his distinction that they are “not the closest friend[s],” Hawthorne articulates the “skeptical ethics of friendship” that defined both his personal and print interactions.¹² Skepticism temporarily aside, the complex authorial persona in “The Custom House” claims that knowledge of these friendly readers “thaws” his “native reserve” and facilitates his personal reflections about himself and the Custom House. Recalling theorist Walter Ong’s injunction that “an author’s audience is always a fiction,” Hawthorne’s imaginative construction of an ideal audience of non-intimate friends allows him to once again define spatial boundaries in his preface; his act of veiling “the innermost Me” creates a private space in the midst of a published preface.¹³ It is only through this negotiation and preservation of a “Me” that is

¹² Davis 156. “What was important about his personal shyness was the way it clarified his sense of ethical restraint, the way all relationships came to represent the difficulty of knowing others and the even greater challenge of admitting his own lack of knowledge. Call it a skeptical ethics of friendship, delicate and sometimes dangerous when the world refused to allow for such refinement.”

¹³ Walter Ong, “The Writer’s Audience is Always a Fiction” *An Ong Reader: Challenges for Further Inquiry* (Cresskill, NC: Hampton Press, Inc., 2002).

separate and inviolable from a “Public” that Hawthorne can consent to “prate” about himself and his circumstances: “To this extent and within these limits, an author, methinks, may be autobiographical, without violating either the reader’s rights or his own” (*SL* 8).¹⁴ It is, of course, quite obvious which of these rights—the reader’s or his own—motivates his imposition of “limits” in this, his most confessional of prefaces.

Hawthorne conclusively circumvents his own alleged unease about his “autobiographical” tone by framing his firing from the Custom House as a death scene: “Keeping up the metaphor of the political guillotine, the whole may be considered as the POSTHUMOUS PAPERS OF A DECAPITATED SURVEYOR; and the sketch which I am now bringing to a close, if too autobiographical for a modest person to publish in his lifetime, will readily be excused in a gentleman who writes from beyond the grave” (*SL* 42). Drawing attention to his candor in the text, he sanctions such uncharacteristic forthrightness as the privilege of the dead. Hawthorne’s dismissal from the Custom House and the attendant anger and emotional upheaval associated with that period were, as many scholars have argued, a period of resurrection and new life for Hawthorne. As Wineapple argues, “The decapitation, as he provocatively called his firing, revived him. He could now compose—in the full tide of anger. Ambivalent scribbler no longer, Hawthorne is avenger, scalper, judge, and adjudicator...”¹⁵ Although Hawthorne allows the uncommon personal revelations in the preface as the prerogative of a dead man, he is quick to contrast the political martyr, “my figurative self,” with the “real human being” who rebounds from his firing by buying pens, ink, and paper (*SL* 42).

¹⁴ As scholars like Brenda Wineapple have observed, many of his works share the concerns expressed in “The Custom House” about the relationship between public and private selves: “The plot of [*The Scarlet Letter*] shuttles between interior and exterior locations...the chapter ‘The Interior of a Heart’ suggest[s] how the private and public worlds are often at tragic variance” (212).

¹⁵ Wineapple 210-211. Of course, Hawthorne makes no secret of his dissatisfaction with his government position; the timeliness of his metaphorical “decapitation” is likened to “that of a person who should entertain an idea of committing suicide, and, altogether beyond his hopes, meet with the good hap to be murdered” (*SL* 43).

This is, of course, the delicate balance that Hawthorne attempts to maintain in “The Custom House”; winking at his “autobiographical” preface, which, conveniently tars many of his political enemies, he yet again reminds readers of the “real human being” shaping both the preface and the novel.¹⁶

This art of limiting self-exposure is similar to that practiced in “The Old Manse.” Yet the complex fictional back story and figurative death Hawthorne uses to layer his authorial position in “The Custom House” only serve to heighten his own exposure in this text. As Dan McCall observes, the turbulent, politicized world of the Salem Custom House was “no country for the man from the Old Manse”; the Hawthorne we encounter in this autobiographical preface is not the same hesitant host found in *Mosses from an Old Manse*. Instead, Hawthorne’s time at the Custom House inserted him into a world of doing, effectively removing him from a world of dreams so captivately and elusively described in “The Old Manse.”¹⁷ His stated aim to return to a “realm of quiet” as the harsh realities of the Custom House recede into the stuff of dreams was an emotionally charged decision for Hawthorne, prompted by the disturbing scandalmongering and political backbiting that accompanied both his dismissal from the Custom House and the publication of his preface.¹⁸ As generations of readers have discerned, “The Custom House” is a preface that brings its author fascinatingly, disconcertingly, into contact

¹⁷ Dan McCall, *Citizens of Somewhere Else: Nathaniel Hawthorne and Henry James* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999) 39. McCall writes: “At the end of [Hawthorne’s] essay he inverts the terms that began it. The Custom-House, which once stood for actuality and hostility to imagination, is now ‘a dream’” (41).

¹⁸ For more on the significance of the Custom House incident on Hawthorne and his reception, see Stephen Nissenbaum, “The Firing of Nathaniel Hawthorne,” *Essex Institute Historical Collection* 114 (April 1978); see also McCall, “The Design of the Custom House” in *Citizens of Somewhere Else*, 36-44.

with the reader. As his sister-in-law Mary Mann observed, *The Scarlet Letter* was “a book one reads shudderingly. Among other things, it reveals Hawthorne.”¹⁹

“a man of mosses...hoodwinking the world”

Julian Hawthorne once observed, “My father was two men.” After reading his father’s work as an adult, Julian confessed that “he was unable to comprehend how a man such as I knew my father to be could have written such books. He did not talk in that way, his moods had not seemed to be of that color.”²⁰ Julian is unable to reconcile the author’s public productions with the “man...I knew my father to be.” In fact, Julian’s contention that his father’s published works represent a radical departure from the private man further solidifies Hawthorne’s repeated representation of himself as inaccessible and inscrutable. Hawthorne, of course, toys with a kind of subjective duality throughout his prefaces; the veils and other conceits used to disguise him from the reading public’s probing gaze clearly signal his own process of bifurcating interior and exterior representations of self.²¹ Thus far, this chapter has explored Hawthorne’s coy, and at times clumsy, experiments with authorial representation in his two self-identified “autobiographical” prefaces. I now turn to Hawthorne’s consideration of public perception and the threat it posed to both the private man and the public author, to the

¹⁹ Quoted in Wineapple 216.

²⁰ Quoted in McCall 21-22. Wineapple also reflects on the “doubleness” of Hawthorne, quoting his letter to Sophia in which he states “Nobody would think that the same man could live two such different lives simultaneously” (quoted on 231).

²¹ Hawthorne actually played at being “two men” when he published “Chiefly About War Matters” anonymously in the July 1862 *Atlantic Monthly*. The article, famous for its claim that “any common-sensical man” must feel a “certain intellectual satisfaction” in seeing John Brown hanged, was accompanied by “editorial notes” penned by Hawthorne that criticized the authors’ views, chiding, “Can it be a son of old Massachusetts who utters this abominable statement? For shame.” Henry James noted that these editorial notes were intended to “disclaim all sympathy with the writer’s political heresies,” little knowing that it was Hawthorne who “disclaimed all sympathy” with himself in the article (McCall 33).

man ensconced behind the veil and the man who had hitherto flaunted and boasted of the veil's ability to shield "the Inmost Me."

Part of James Fields' ambitious plan to manufacture Hawthorne into a well-regarded author, if not indeed a celebrity, involved the steady reissue of previous works in the years following the critical and popular success of *The Scarlet Letter*.²² Thus, in 1851, Ticknor and Fields published a second edition of Hawthorne's *Twice Told Tales*, complete with a new preface. It is in this preface that we find Hawthorne at his most self-deprecating and simultaneously most self-aware, coiling further inward whilst preparing for a strike outward at readers and critics. In it he traces his career in the well-known vein, citing his dubious distinction as the "obscurest man of letters in America" who toiled in the shadows of American literature for years. He is, as yet, uncertain of his audience: "it was long after [the first editions of *Twice Told Tales* and *Mosses from an Old Manse*], if it even yet be the case, the Author could regard himself as addressing the American Public, or, indeed, any Public at all. He was merely writing to his known or unknown friends" (1151). This is Hawthorne as myth-maker, and, as generations of critical assessments have proven, his narrative of a rise from obscurity into public recognition and acclaim was powerful and compelling. As Meredith McGill argues, Hawthorne's narrative of obscurity "has exerted a tenacious and distorting hold on critical accounts of his career." The danger of this tenacious hold, as McGill explains, is that often it permits scholars to accept Hawthorne's preface to *Twice Told Tales* as "a candid explanation of the motives for his seclusion and an accurate account of his early reception."²³

²² For more on Fields' early efforts to expand Hawthorne's reputation, see Richard Brodhead, *The School of Hawthorne* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986) 54-58.

²³ Meredith McGill, "The Problem of Hawthorne's Popularity," *Reciprocal Influences: Literary Production, Distribution, and Consumption in America* eds. Steven Fink and Susan S. Williams (Columbus, OH: The Ohio State University Press, 1999) 39.

Hawthorne's preface to *Twice Told Tales* is often considered in piecemeal, with Hawthorne's opening narrative of obscurity and later claim about his intent "to open an intercourse with the world" attracting most critical attention (1152). Scholars like Nina Baym, Richard Brodhead, and Brenda Wineapple have done much to fill in the shadows of Hawthorne's alleged obscurity in late 1830s and 1840s, thereby rendering his "account of his early reception" in the preface to *Twice Told Tales* at best, self-indulgent, and at worst, entirely erroneous.²⁴ Yet Hawthorne's explanation of his "motives for seclusion," as identified by McGill, are still very fertile ground for exploration; Hawthorne's discussion of his own privacy and inviolability signals much about his awareness of the reading public and his attempts to both relate to and retreat from those problematic "known or unknown friends." Promising to define "what these sketches truly are" for his audience, Hawthorne continues: "They are not the talk of a secluded man with his own mind and heart, (had it been so, they could hardly have failed to be more deeply and permanently valuable,) but his attempts, and very imperfectly successful ones, to open an intercourse with the world" (1152). Hawthorne firmly identifies his work as a public production; these are not documents that provide access to the private mind and heart of "a secluded man." Yet while most critical attention is focused on Hawthorne's appeal for sympathy regarding his attempt "to open an intercourse with the world," his prior contention about the "value" of seclusion again calls attention to his own ambiguous relationship with the reading public. In essence, Hawthorne is claiming that his work would be "more deeply and permanently valuable" if it had *not* been written for an audience. Framed as a parenthetical aside, his comment can be read as an authorial afterthought; however, this passage is quite significant for two seemingly incongruous reasons: first, he insists that his published works are not

²⁴ See for example: Nina Baym, *The Shape of Hawthorne's Career* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1976); Brodhead, *The School of Hawthorne*; Wineapple, *Hawthorne: A Life*.

documents of personal reflection, open to the probing analysis of curious readers; second, he argues that they would have been better if they were.

Perhaps most importantly, the passage illustrates his attempt to frame himself as a private public man, rather than vice versa.²⁵ His critical and popular success in the early 1850s prompted Hawthorne to reinforce the boundaries of authorial subjectivity articulated in his prior autobiographical prefaces. Published only ten months after the reissue of *Twice Told Tales*, Hawthorne's preface to *The Snow-Image* (1851) again characterizes his audience as vaguely menacing. In his public letter to Bridge, he writes: "There can be no question as to the propriety of my inscribing this volume of earlier and later sketches to you, and pausing here, a few moments, to speak of them, as friend speaks to friend; still being cautious, however, that the public and the critics shall overhear nothing which we care about concealing" (1155). There can be no "impropriety" in speaking personally in a published preface; yet, as if compelled, he adds his admonitions about caution and concealment. Hawthorne's audience here is expanded to include both "the public" and "the critics," a qualification that Wineapple cites as indicative of Hawthorne's sensitivity to criticism evident in the 1851 preface to *Twice Told Tales*: "[He] strikes preemptively, disputing the criticism he pretends to accept. With typical disingenuousness, he wonders how his stories managed to have any vogue at all, and he denigrates his early tales...much in the manner of Poe and Fuller."²⁶ Hawthorne's decision to include critics in his remarks about concealment dovetails with his increased success and corresponding media presence, due largely to Fields' efforts. Critics, like popular audiences, mined published works

²⁵ Both Diana Fuss and Richard Sewell share a similar description of Emily Dickinson's "private public"; as Fuss argues, Dickinson worked to "develop a public persona as a private poet." See Diana Fuss, *The Sense of an Interior: Four Writers and the Rooms that Shaped Them* (New York: Routledge, 2004) 59; Richard Sewell, *The Life of Emily Dickinson* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1974) 400, 603.

²⁶ Wineapple 230.

for private insights; as early as 1842, for example, Evert Duyckinck had described Hawthorne's penchant for "translating" his life into his work: "Mr. Hawthorne is truly original—for he has translated a great portion of his life into the fancies and quaint similitudes of his tales."²⁷

Of course, not all critics were convinced by Hawthorne's account of his literary exile. Published in the same month as the reissue of *Twice Told Tales*, one anonymous review in *The Church Review and Ecclesiastical Register* objects to Hawthorne's practice of concealment and, in the reviewers' opinion, insincere humility in both "The Old Manse" and the preface to "Rappacini's Daughter":

Pooh! Pooh! Mr. Hawthorne, are you in earnest, or are you not? If not—why, in the name of sense, stand whining about Mons. de l'Aubepine's unpopularity, when you know Hawthorne's books are fairly thumbed to pieces by the readers of all circulating libraries, and that everybody is disposed to like them and to buy them; if you are, pray throw away your transcendentalism, and your sympathetic ink, your refinement and your remoteness, your circle and your clique, and come down to flesh and blood, and live, and act, and talk like other men, and we assure you, you have talents that will take care of themselves...we never hear a really gifted man talking in this vein of Mons. de l'Aubepine, without longing to make so bold as to ask him to a bit of roast beef and a bottle of brown stout, in a plain, family way, with a benevolent idea of invigorating his constitution in time to prevent the process of evaporative dissolution.²⁸

The reviewer adopts a chiding tone, challenging the author to behave sensibly with regards to his reputation. The reviewer questions if Hawthorne's self-deprecations and evasions in both prefaces are "in earnest," arguing that if they are indeed authorial posturing, he should stop "whining about Mons. De l'Aubepine's unpopularity, when you know Hawthorne's books are fairly thumbed to pieces." Seeing clearly through Hawthorne's "Mons. l'Aubepine," the reviewer, writing in the wake of *The Scarlet Letter's* success and James Fields' ambitious management, explodes the myth of Hawthorne's "unpopularity," instead asserting that audiences are "disposed" to like and buy his books. Yet while the reviewer essentially calls Hawthorne's

²⁷ "Hawthorne's Twice Told Tales," *Arcturus: A Journal of Books and Opinion* 3.17 (Apr. 1842): 394.

²⁸ "The Writings of Hawthorne," *The Church Review and Ecclesiastical Register* 3.4 (Jan. 1851): 489.

bluff, he simultaneously reinforces the author's image as a "refined" and "remote" man, who needs to "come down to flesh and blood, and live, and act, and talk like other men." To this effect, the reviewer invites Hawthorne for a hearty, invigorating meal, "in a plain, family way," in the hopes of "prevent[ing] the process of evaporative dissolution" he identifies in Hawthorne and his work. Again, Hawthorne is in danger of disappearing. His tales, as he cautioned in the 1851 preface to *Twice Told Tales*, may dissolve from the page if not read correctly; his remoteness, his self-effacement, and his posturing now portend, according to this reviewer, his own "evaporative dissolution."

At a time when, according to Melville, "there are hardly five critics in America; and several of them are asleep," Hawthorne had begun to push against a particularly common thread found in reviews of himself and his work: Hawthorne is refined, Hawthorne is timid, Hawthorne is full of unrealized potential.²⁹ He speaks directly to this in the *Twice Told Tales* preface when describing the "kindly feeling[s]" of readers which, engendered by his book, have now transferred to the author: "This kindly feeling, (in some cases, at least,) extended to the Author, who, on the internal evidence of his sketches, came to be regarded as a mild, shy, gentle, melancholic, exceedingly sensitive, and not very forcible man, hiding his blushes under an assumed name, the quaintness of which was supposed, somehow or other, to symbolize his personal and literary traits" (1153). Part of a larger performance of hesitation and lamentation over prior obscurity in the preface, Hawthorne's jab about the faulty "internal evidence of his sketches" conveys a specific threat to those who insist on searching for clues about the author in his printed texts. Unlike prior prefatory claims of inaccessibility, Hawthorne does not simply evade readers by veiling himself; instead, he intimates that his privileged, protected "Inmost Me" will likely begin to conform to this image of a tentative, reclusive, and relatively ineffectual man:

²⁹ Herman Melville, "Hawthorne and his Mosses" *The Literary World* 7 (24 Aug. 1850): 145.

“He is by no means certain, that some of his subsequent productions have not been influenced and modified by a natural desire to fill up so amiable an outline, and to act in consonance with the character assigned to him; nor, even now, could [I] forfeit it without a few tears of tender sensibility” (1153). Although Hawthorne dispenses his own authorial persona in the previous “autobiographical” prefaces, he clearly does not relish critical attempts to pin down his character. However, this is more than an annoyance for Hawthorne. As his closing remarks explain, such a “natural desire to fill up so amiable an outline” could infect an author, resulting in a loss of originality. There is a danger, he implies, in identifying with a public version of himself or to “act in consonance with the character assigned to him.” He completes his darkly humorous sketch with heavy irony; if forced to “forfeit” such an obliging image, the only recourse of this shy, melancholy, sensitive man are “tears of tender sensibility.” Meredith McGill reads this passage as self-effacing: “Hawthorne flatters the reader by suggesting that he has formed his sense of self on the pattern of his reception”; she laments Hawthorne’s own role in accepting such a timid authorial persona.³⁰ Yet while relatively recent reviews by Poe, Fuller, Duyckinck, and even Melville conformed somewhat to the picture painted in the 1851 *Twice Told Tales* preface, Hawthorne himself is the one holding the brush. This passage is a subtle attempt to extend the authorial veil invoked so stridently in the prior prefaces. While mocking this limited, yet self-constructed, image of a reclusive author, Hawthorne publicly conforms to it, all the while brushing away “tender tears” with an ironic smile.

The “preemptive strike” against critics was, curiously enough, coupled with the first widely distributed image of Nathaniel Hawthorne. Fields had arranged that all reprints of the 1851 preface in periodicals were printed with an engraving taken from Cephas Thompson’s 1850 portrait of Hawthorne [See Figure 4.2]. Sophia Hawthorne was

³⁰ McGill 39.

delighted with the Thompson portrait, gushing “no one has ever drawn or painted anything of Mr. Hawthorne comparable to this, and Mr. Thompson must have a wondrous perception and have seen all he has there expressed.”³¹ That Hawthorne’s mocking denial of public perception, whether justified or self-constructed, was presented simultaneously with a portrait that boasted “a wondrous perception” of the author is rarely noted by critics. Yet this odd juxtaposition of denial and invitation is particularly compelling, as, Hawthorne likely intended it to be. Reflecting on what Pearson calls the “simultaneous presence and absence” that is possible in the preface, Clark Davis suggests a pattern of withholding and stimulation in Hawthorne’s management of his public persona: “So Hawthorne chooses an image of public or external identity to figure the private or internal self. He then offers to ‘veil’ that public/private self by presumably withholding one set of information and simultaneously offering another. In this way ‘veiling’ is not so much hiding one’s ‘face’ with a blank mask as it is refusing to show one face by showing another in its place.”³² Hawthorne denies critics and readers access to an authentic interior based solely on the “internal evidence of his sketches” thereby “refus[ing] to show one face” while providing another, quite literally, in its place. Sophia had remarked that the Thompson portrait “makes me catch my breath as I gaze at it” because it conveyed a “sad sweetness” she thought few could capture.³³ It is perhaps doubly ironic, then, that the face Hawthorne was compelled to share with his public, at the urging of Fields, was one credited with an ability to penetrate character that Hawthorne had attempted to deny his critics.

³¹ Quoted in Wineapple 239; Fields’ arrangements for engraving 238.

³² Davis 56.

³³ Wineapple 239.

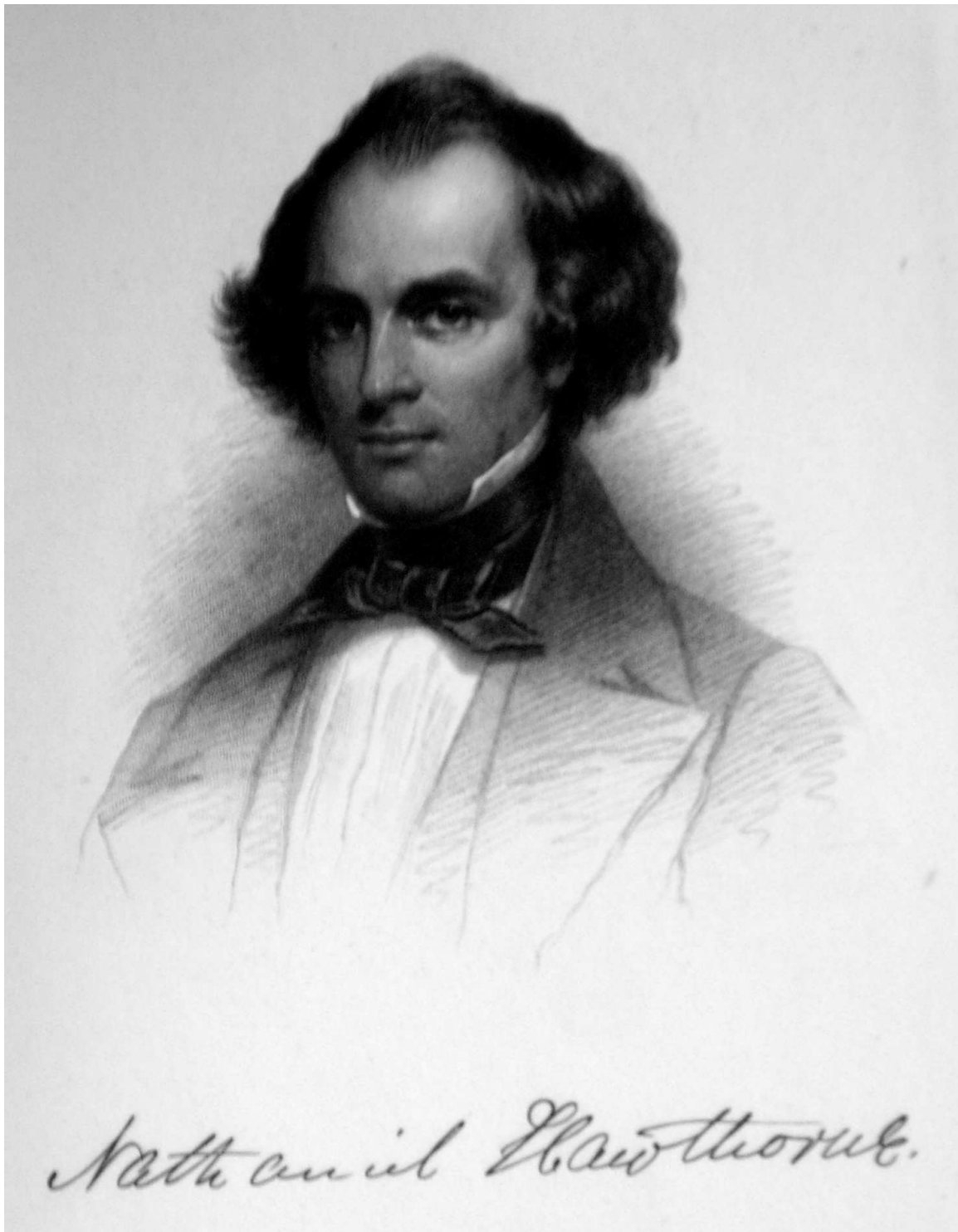


Fig. 4.2: Engraving of Nathaniel Hawthorne from the Cephas Thompson portrait. Included in *Homes of American Authors*. New York: G.P. Putnam and Co.: 1853. Image courtesy of the New York Public Library

Hawthorne's comparison of his tales to "pale flowers that [had] blossomed in too retired a shade" and were suffused with "the coolness of a meditative habit" is often characterized as a direct response to those, like Poe and Fuller, who had faulted his reliance on allegory and the quality of teeming stillness in his work. The 1851 preface attributes this tendency to one of two possible causes: "whether from a lack of power, or an unconquerable reserve, the Author's touches have often an effect of tameness" (1152). Although he appears to consider "a lack of power" as the root of any alleged "tameness," Hawthorne scuttles this option, instead reinforcing the isolation and obscurity that characterized the period of his earlier creative production; he reminds readers of his "unconquerable reserve" and of his "retirement" when writing the tales that comprised *Twice Told Tales*, even denying the aspects that "purport to be pictures of actual life" by clothing them in the "shivering" cloak of allegory (1152). The timing of Hawthorne's rejoinder, on the heels of his first notable popular success, supports the notion that he used his 1851 preface to address prior criticism of his work. Furthermore, when *Twice Told Tales* was reissued, several of Hawthorne's contemporaries had already published influential reviews that had done much to shape his reputation and lay the foundation for his success. The most fascinating for generations of scholars has been, of course, Melville's extended exploration of authorial personality in "Hawthorne and his Mosses," wherein he depicts Hawthorne as something of a knowing puppet master, pulling the strings of public perception, famously declaring that "this Man of Mosses takes great delight in hoodwinking the world,—at least, with respect to himself."³⁴

³⁴ Herman Melville, "Hawthorne and his Mosses," *The Literary World* 7 (24 Aug. 1850): 145. Brodhead's explication of Melville's development of a "literary-prophetical vocation" in "Hawthorne and his Mosses" is one of many excellent critical readings of Melville's essay (see "Hawthorne, Melville, and the Fiction of Prophecy" in *The School of Hawthorne*). For more on Melville's complex and at times convoluted attempts to appropriate Hawthorne's body (and body of work) see also Ellen Weinauer, "Plagiarism and the Proprietary Self: Policing the Boundaries of Authorship in Herman Melville's 'Hawthorne and his Mosses,'" *American Literature* 69.4 (December 1997): 697-717. For compelling analysis of the brief friendship and correspondence of Hawthorne and Melville, see Elizabeth

Poe had attempted to define and explain Hawthorne's popularity in a series of reviews published in *Graham's* and *Godey's Lady's Book*, citing the "very marked idiosyncrasy of Mr. Hawthorne" as a discernable aspect of his writing. Debunking Hawthorne's much-lauded originality, Poe instead described him as tedious in his comprehensive 1847 review of both *Mosses from an Old Manse* and *Twice Told Tales*: "In concluding a volume, and more especially all the volumes of the author, the critic will abandon his first design of calling him 'original,' and content himself with styling him 'peculiar.'" Poe's oft-quoted admonishment to "get a bottle of visible ink, [and] come out from the Old Manse" is, of course, rife with Poe's distaste for Transcendentalism ("cut Mr. Alcott, hang (if possible) the editor of the 'Dial'") and Hawthorne's politics ("throw out of the window to the pigs all his odd numbers of the *North American Review*"); but Poe is doing more than daring Hawthorne to "show himself."³⁵ He claims that Hawthorne's steady and repeated use of allegory masks the true depth of his talent,³⁶ a critique Hawthorne addresses in his 1851 *Twice Told Tales* preface: "Instead of passion, there is sentiment; and, even in what purport to be pictures of actual life, we have allegory, not always so warmly dressed in its habiliments of flesh and blood, as to be taken into the reader's mind without a shiver" (1152).³⁷

Hewitt, "Scarlet Letters, Dead Letters: Correspondence and the Poetics of Democracy in Melville and Hawthorne," *The Yale Journal of Criticism* 12.2 (1999): 295-319; Wineapple 221-219.

³⁵ Edgar Allan Poe, "Tale-Writing—Nathaniel Hawthorne," *Godey's Magazine and Lady's Book* 35 (Nov. 1847): 252.

³⁶ Poe writes in "Tale-Writing—Nathaniel Hawthorne": "He is infinitely too fond of allegory, and can never hope for popularity so long as he persists in it. This he will not do, for allegory is at war with the whole tone of his nature, which dispirits itself never so well as when escaping from the mysticism of his Goodman Browns and White Old Maids into the hearty, genial, but still Indian-summer sunshine of his Wakefields and Little Annie's Rambles."

³⁷ As with his biting self-portrait in the preface, there is critical disagreement about Hawthorne's intention in his disavowal of allegory. Similarly, Margaret Fuller identified a coldness and remoteness in his work that was echoed in many reviews, including the extended review published in *The Church Review and Ecclesiastical Register*. Fuller's 1837 assessment of *Twice Told Tales* noted that Hawthorne did not "paint with blood-warm colors"; her published review of *Mosses from an Old Manse*, featured prominently on the front page of the *New-York Tribune*, famously limited

Like Poe, Evert Duyckinck wrote a series of reviews that were influential in establishing Hawthorne's reputation; unlike Poe, his goal was primarily to name and proclaim Hawthorne's talent.³⁸ Brodhead quotes John O'Sullivan's comment about the importance of Duyckinck's reviews in "manufacturing [Hawthorne] into a Personage," even comparing Duyckinck's efforts to promote and encourage Hawthorne with the indefatigable Fields: "The Hawthorne of the 1840s was one of the most direct beneficiaries of Duyckinck's cultural labors...In his capacity as literary reviewer Duyckinck wrote, between 1841 and 1845, four of the articles that most durably established Hawthorne's claims to fame."³⁹ In his extended 1845 review of Hawthorne's works, published in O'Sullivan's *Democratic Review*, Duyckinck not only augurs much of Melville's praise in "Hawthorne and his Mosses," he repeatedly uses the tales to reveal and represent Hawthorne the author. In one awkward metaphor, Duyckinck attempts to explain a notion expressed with more felicity nearly five years later by an ecstatic Melville—the warring firmness and sweetness found in Hawthorne's work: "Imagine a man of a rugged frame of body and a delicate mind, of a physical hardihood to tempt all extremes of weather and suffer no annoyance...with a fancy within airy, fragile and sensitive as a maiden's; the rough hairy rind of the cocoa-nut enclosing its sweet whiteness; fancy all this as a type of Nathaniel Hawthorne..." Duyckinck's Hawthorne-as-cocoa-nut transposes Melville's "blackness" to an outer shell that conceals and protects "a fancy...fragile and sensitive as a maiden's."⁴⁰ Yet while his reviews of Hawthorne do much to

Hawthorne's powers: "Hawthorne intimates and suggests, but he does not lay bare the mysteries of our being" (Quoted in Wineapple 155, 194). Again, the review moves from published work to private man.

³⁸ Evert Duyckinck, "Nathaniel Hawthorne," *The United States Magazine and Democratic Review* 16 (Apr. 1845): 376. In fact, in the April 1845 edition of the *Democratic Review*, Duyckinck seems to directly compare his efforts with Poe's more strident, at times acerbic, critical stance: "leaving to others the measuring and drilling of the raw recruit in literature, we prefer the ease and freedom—the abandon with the officers in the mess-room."

³⁹ Brodhead 53-54.

⁴⁰ Duyckinck, like many fellow critics, also noted the shadowy quality of Hawthorne's prose and a corresponding rigid duality of good and evil in his works; he finds, in Hawthorne, "the shadow which Sin and Death in their twin

elucidate the concerns of his Young America cohort, Duyckinck, along with Poe, Fuller, Melville, and many other lesser-known, anonymous critics, consistently practices a kind of critical reading that encourages and validates a search for Hawthorne in his texts. Even as Duyckinck conjures “a type of Nathaniel Hawthorne” in his coconut analogy, his observations are founded on a corporeal representation; “imagine a man,” he urges his audience, as they reflect on Hawthorne’s body of work.

George William Curtis’ extensive analysis of Hawthorne differs significantly from a reading practice that searched for Hawthorne, largely because his sketch perpetuated many of the myths and subterfuges peddled by Hawthorne in “The Old Manse,” “The Custom House,” and the 1851 preface to *Twice Told Tales*. Curtis’ “Hawthorne,” was published in the 1853 collection of engravings and author’s biographies penned by fellow literary luminaries, *Homes of American Authors*; the entire collection was expanded and reprinted in 1857, and Curtis’ “Hawthorne” was replicated in Elbert Hubbard’s “Little Journeys” series dedicated to American authors’ homes in 1896. Curtis’ sketch is remarkable for the degree in which it removes Hawthorne from society and mythologizes the Manse as an idyllic space for creative reverie. He repeats, with negligible alterations, Hawthorne’s narrative of obscurity from *Twice Told Tales*, soliciting pity for an unheeded piper: “[Hawthorne] had lived a hermit in respectable Salem, an absolute recluse even from his own family, walking out by night and writing wild tales by day, most of which were burnt in his bachelor fire, and some of which, in newspapers, magazines, and annuals, led a wandering, uncertain, and mostly unnoticed life....But he piped to the world, and it did not dance. He wept to it, and it did not mourn. The book, however, as all good

flights are for ever casting upon the world; shadows which fall alike upon the so called evil and the so called good, which darken all that is pure, and defile all that is sacred, but not more than in actual life.” Evert Duyckinck, “Nathaniel Hawthorne,” 376. A review in the *New Englander* makes a similar claim: “And while [Hawthorne] looks with a kindly eye on human nature, and appreciates all its good qualities, he seems to be aware of its dark depths and its universal fountain of corruption.” See “Nathaniel Hawthorne,” *New Englander* 5.17 (Jan. 1847): 56.

books do, made its way into various hearts.”⁴¹ Curtis tells a tale that is now quite familiar; that of a young man so withdrawn he rarely saw his family when living under the same roof, a man who would lament in an 1837 letter to Longfellow: “I have made a captive of myself and put me into a dungeon, and now I cannot find the key to let myself out—and if the door were open, I should be almost afraid to come out.”⁴²

Curtis’ “Hawthorne” warrants further critical attention, especially because it reinforced and disseminated the myth of Hawthorne as recluse, happily disassociated from society throughout the latter half of the nineteenth century. Yet for the purposes of this study, I focus on the ways in which the ambiguous, shadowy authorial persona of the autobiographical prefaces returns, multiplied both in force and isolation, in Curtis’ lengthy verbal portrait of Hawthorne; the reluctant host of “The Old Manse” and the decapitated surveyor of “The Custom House” has been rechristened as “a man whom nobody knew” (*HAA* 208). The manse, rather than the Custom House, serves as both symbol and central structure in the essay. Curtis attempts to cast a spell on the old parsonage, claiming that “a cloud of romance suddenly fell out of the heaven of fancy and enveloped the Old Manse” (*HAA* 206) and granting it a kind of magical ability to foster Hawthorne’s development and shield him from public conjecture: “Our author occupied the Old Manse for three years. During that time he was not seen probably, by more than a dozen of the villagers” (*HAA* 215). Those few who did see Hawthorne, in Curtis’ narrative, saw only fragments of a man: “Sometimes, in the forenoon, a

⁴¹ George William Curtis, “Hawthorne,” *Homes of American Authors: Comprising Anecdotal, Personal, and Descriptive Sketches by various writers* (New York: G.P. Putnam and Co., 1853) 202. All subsequent references will be included parenthetically in the text, distinguished by *HAA*.

⁴² Quoted in Wineapple 96-97. Curtis turns the table on Hawthorne’s portrait of an apprehensive man fearful of leaving his room, writing in “Hawthorne” that local villagers were afraid to knock on the door of the Manse: “The knocker, which everybody had enjoyed the right of lifting to summon the good old Pastor, no temerity now dared touch. Heavens! What if the figure in the mouldy portrait should peer, in answer, over the eaves, and shake solemnly his decaying surplice! Nay, what if the mysterious man himself should answer the summons and come to the door!” (*HAA* 205).

darkly clad figure was seen in the little garden plot putting in corn or melon seed, and gravely hoeing. It was a brief apparition...[observers] saw no sign of life, except, possibly, upon some Monday, the ghostly skirt of a shirt flapping spectrally in the distant orchard” (*HAA* 207).

Drawing on Hawthorne’s reflections about the joys of garden and orchard in “The Old Manse,” Curtis imagines a now ghostly Hawthorne “gravely hoeing.” Curtis’ Hawthorne is chiefly distinguished for his ability to disappear; he is “a brief apparition” and “as much a phantom and a fable as the old Pastor of the parish, dead half a century before” (*HAA* 205). Like Hawthorne, Curtis repeatedly links the author to the clergymen who inhabited the house in years past; yet while Hawthorne uses these comparisons to articulate his own desire for the “near retirement, and accessible seclusion” of the Manse, Curtis imagines both Hawthorne and old Dr. Ripley as phantoms and fables; both are inexorably inaccessible (1123).

Yet while Curtis’ Hawthorne threatens to vanish entirely, he foregrounds the Manse as the seat of genius and a defining space for Hawthorne’s development. “Hawthorne is so intimately associated with the ‘Old Manse,’” argues Curtis, because his literary style “harmonizes so well with ancient places”; Hawthorne delights in “musing over the young and lovely life” lived at the Manse (*HAA* 219). The sketch features a reproduced letter from Hawthorne in which he describes returning to the Old Manse and his reflections about the changes to the property [See Figure 4.3]. The Manse continues to influence Hawthorne, Curtis implies. Curtis repeatedly compares the Hawthorne family with the dreamy character of the Manse, claiming that “the house, its inmates, and its life, lay, dream-like, upon the edge of the little village” and observing that “the tranquility of the golden-haired Una was the living and breathing type of the dreamy life of the old Manse” (219). The golden child of fancy, a dreamy author at repose, a home of dreams: Curtis romanticizes the Old Manse with heavy brush strokes. However, much

Concord, July 15th '52.

I passed by the Old Manse,
a few days ago, for the first time in
nearly seven years. Notwithstanding
the repairs, it looked very much as of
yore, except that a large window had
been opened on the roof, through which
light and cheerfulness probably shone into
the darkest part of the dim garret of
my early time. The trees of the avenue—
how many leaves have fallen since I
last saw them!—had an aspect of wear-
iness, which disappointed me; either

Truly Yours,
Nathaniel Hawthorne

Fig. 4.3: Nathaniel Hawthorne correspondence about his return to the Old Manse. Included in *Homes of American Authors*. New York: G.P. Putnam and Co.: 1853. Image courtesy of the New York Public Library

of the interest generated by Hawthorne's coy autobiographical prefaces is gone from Curtis' glowing narrative of Hawthorne and his former home. While Hawthorne left tantalizing space for speculation about his accessibility and toyed with ways to craft a simultaneous absence and presence in his prefaces, Curtis's "Hawthorne" insistently reinvents the author as a solitary, romantic hero. Here there is no "hide-and-seek" with readers, as Miller described; far from inviting readers to search for him, Curtis' Hawthorne is simply hiding. Indeed, Curtis' insistent imagery of a man branded by genius, rather than a symbolic birthmark or black crepe veil, inevitably and paradoxically transforms his "Hawthorne" into a rather flat, lifeless, allegory of authorship. The quiet flame is gone from this mossy man, as Melville described him. If Melville's soliloquy recognized a fiery passion seething in Hawthorne, Curtis' homage quenches that fire. Ironically, Hawthorne's cryptic recognition of his allegorical characters' shortcomings

in the 1851 *Twice Told Tales* preface best describes the man publicized in Curtis' 1853 sketch: shuddering, cold, and inhuman.

Private spaces, published interiors

The bulk of Curtis' narrative situates Hawthorne outdoors or hiding within the structure of the house. The only interior space that he dwells on is the "apocryphal study," as he describes it, a hallowed space where Hawthorne penned his famous tales and branded the interior with his unique genius (*HAA* 215). Curtis' essay on Hawthorne was, after all, part of a series intended to unveil and celebrate American authors' homes for curious readers. *Homes of American Authors* was initially conceived by George Putnam as an effort to establish the profession of authorship in America by displaying the fine homes of authors like Longfellow, Edward Everett, William Gilmore Simms, and William Cullen Bryant: "authorship in America," opined Putnam, "notwithstanding the want of an international copyright, which has been so sorely felt by literary laborers, has at last become a profession which men may live by."⁴³ The disclosure of "how men live" was certainly the prerogative of the series; yet the visual and verbal images of authors' homes were also intended to satisfy curious readers interested in picturing literary celebrities in their private, domestic spaces. Moreover, descriptions and images of interior spaces, especially authors' studies, were intended to convey information about both the author and his writing process. Diana Fuss describes authors' studies as "theaters of composition," spaces "animated by artifacts, machines, mementos that 'frame' intellectual labor." Building on the pioneering work of Walter Benjamin, recent scholarly work on interior spaces and artistic and intellectual subjectivity by Fuss, Victoria Rosner, and Christopher Reed persuasively argues that interior spaces in the nineteenth century could both reflect and shape

⁴³ Quoted in Christoph Irmscher, *Longfellow Reduc* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006) 44-45.



Fig. 4.4: Image of Edward Everett's library, published as the frontispiece to *Homes of American Authors*. New York: G.P. Putnam, 1853. Image courtesy of the New York Public Library

those who lived within them. As Benjamin suggests, the symmetry of domestic interior and psychological interior was a marker of modernity; extending this thread, Fuss argues that “modernity is simply another name for the reign of interiority, that moment in history where exteriority is driven indoors by the domesticating passions of the bourgeoisie.”⁴⁴ Benjamin describes this potential for exchange and influence between interior spaces (an inner nature and a three-dimensional space) as the “phantasmagorias of the interior.” Popular interest in the homes and private studies of authors speaks to an awakening interest on the part of popular

⁴⁴ See Diana Fuss, *The sense of an interior: four writers and the rooms that shaped them* (New York: Routledge, 2004) 12; Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations* ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1968); Christopher Reed, *Bloomsbury Rooms: Modernism, Subculture and Domesticity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004); Victoria Rosner, *Modernism and the Architecture of Private Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005).

audiences about the ways in which private interior spaces could reveal the phantom of authorial presence.

I close with a brief discussion of Hawthorne's study, which is represented in both "The Old Manse" and Curtis' "Hawthorne." Unlike Edward Everett's personal study, which was published as the frontispiece to *Homes of American Authors*, a visual image of Hawthorne's Manse study was not included in the Putnam collection [see Figure 4.4]. Yet Hawthorne and Curtis both compose clear verbal portraits of the Manse study, a space recognized for its singular privacy and isolation in the midst of a domesticated space. Contemplating the unique position of the study in the family home, Rosner argues that "[the study] is the most private room in the house, a place where the writer can consider the world without being watched by it."⁴⁵ According to Rosner, the study was a privileged authorial space that allowed for both exposure to and isolation from a watching world, a position that also corresponds to Hawthorne's posture in his prefaces. Conceptualizing the preface in spatial terms is, of course, a familiar concept; Henry James famously described prefaces as the windows in the house of fiction. In his public letter to Bridge in *The Snow-Image*, Hawthorne describes the preface as a way to lead readers into the "interior edifice of a book," confirming the preface as an exterior, non-narrative location. While both share the book-as-building metaphor, James' image fundamentally shifts the role of the preface to an interior space that facilitates both looking in and looking out. James recognizes the potential for transparency and exchange in the preface. The published authorial interior, especially the "theater of composition," has the potential to enlighten viewers about both the author and the texts written there; prefaces as windows, studies as windows; textual and physical spaces are invested with the capacity to reveal, but, in Hawthorne's case, both offer limited and at times contradictory exposures.

⁴⁵ Rosner 122.

Hawthorne's Old Manse is conspicuous in its modesty when compared to the engraved images of other authors' homes and interiors in *Homes of American Authors* [see Figure 4.5]. The gracious named estates of James Russell Lowell, Simms, and Longfellow differ from the more modest sketch of the Manse (Fig. 1) featured on the opening page of Curtis' essay. Like Curtis, Hawthorne is most specific about the interior space when describing his study; he describes a kind of intellectual genealogy of the space: "there was, in the rear of the house, the most delightful little nook of a study that ever afforded its snug seclusion to a scholar. It was here that Emerson wrote *Nature*; for he was then an inhabitant of the Manse, and used to watch the Assyrian dawn and the Paphian sunset and moonrise, from the summit of our eastern hill" (1124). Prior generations of inhabitants loomed down on him from their portrait frames, necessitating the redecoration of the Manse study:

These worthies looked strangely like bad angels, or, at least, like men who had wrestled so continually and so sternly with the devil, that somewhat of his sooty fierceness had been imparted to their own visages. They had all vanished now. A cheerful coat of paint, and golden-tinted paper-hangings, lighted up the small apartment...in place of the grim prints, there was the sweet and lovely head of one of Raphael's Madonnas, and two pleasant little pictures of the Lake of Como. The only other decorations were a purple vase of flowers, always fresh, and a bronze one containing graceful ferns. My books (few, and by no means choice; for they were chiefly such waifs as chance had thrown in my way) stood in order about the room, seldom to be disturbed" (1124-1125).

Hawthorne's study in the Manse is decidedly domestic. The addition of cheery wallpaper and paint, flowers, and Sophia's "pleasant little pictures" dispel the gloomy influence of the past. What is more, the space is unique and personal, filled with private mementos of a romance between the author and his wife that was nothing if not shielded and protected. Hawthorne's extended narrative about his study in "The Old Manse" does more than domesticate the seat of genius within the home; description of the study displays what Rosner terms "the most secret place in the house" to a curious public.⁴⁶

⁴⁶ Rosner 124.

In “Hawthorne,” Curtis recounts his own long-awaited invitation to the Old Manse and his delight that the “little western study” corresponds so exactly to Hawthorne’s published description: “...one day I, too, went down the avenue, and disappeared in the house. I mounted



Fig. 4.5: “Craigie House: Cambridge, MA. Residence of H.W. Longfellow.” Featured in *Homes of American Authors*. New York: G.P. Putnam and Co.: 1853. Image courtesy of the New York Public Library

those mysterious stairs to that apocryphal study. I saw ‘the cheerful coat of paint, and golden-tinted paper-hangings,’ lighting up the small apartment; while the shadow of a willow tree, that swept against the overhanging eaves, attempered the cheery western sunshine” (*HAA* 215).

While Curtis was literally invited into the Manse, Hawthorne’s extended description of his study in “The Old Manse” pulls the curtain aside on this domestic, private space, allowing readers to

peek in.⁴⁷ Rosner emphasizes the isolation of the study in terms that resonate with the persona constructed by himself, Curtis, and others: “the study is typically a space for one person alone.

It is the perfect space of privacy, a privacy that enables a heightened degree of autonomy...”⁴⁸

Yet the published study, like the published preface, is a space fraught with contradictions. When visualized in books like *Homes of American Authors*, for example, the study loses its character as a “perfect space of privacy.” Yet even before the *Homes* collection, before Hawthorne was a celebrity, he experimented with using the narrative space of the preface to both hide and expose an authorial persona to curious readers.

⁴⁷ While his prefaces often perform the anxiety he felt over public inspection of himself and his works, Hawthorne’s studies are also concerned with production. In “The Old Manse,” Hawthorne explicitly states that the comfortable, cheerful study was meant to spur him to creative production. His study is crucial to his development as a writer and his productivity. The quiet study space is notably absent in “The Custom House”; he disparages the study he had whilst working at the Custom House and explicitly links this lack with his inability to write: “The same torpor, as regarded the capacity for intellectual effort, accompanied me home, and weighed upon me in the chamber which I most absurdly termed my study” (SL 35). Stephen Railton notes that Hawthorne positions himself specifically in the parlor, rather than the study, when describing his scene of composition in “The Custom House” (109). Stephen Railton, *Authorship and Audience: Literary Performance in the American Renaissance* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991).

⁴⁸ Rosner 93.

Chapter 4

Fanny Fern's Intimate Readers

Fanny Fern's columns in periodicals like the *New York Ledger*, *The Olive Branch*, and *The Musical World and Times* frequently collapsed the boundary between her public work and private life; she chose to write about the intimate details of her domestic life, her opinions on politics and social conventions, and her particular tastes and dislikes. Fern's early career was marked by several collisions between her public and private identities.¹ William Moulton's revelation of Fern's real name in the December 30, 1854 edition of the *True Flag*, exposing the truth behind *Ruth Hall*'s fiction, is the most notorious collapse of her public identity as Fanny Fern and her private identity as Sara Willis Farrington.² She challenged writers who copied her style, or who co-opted her name in order to gain publicity, suing to protect the name as hers exclusively in 1856. In light of these public battles and other scandals, Mary Kelley argues that Fern's career showcases the conflict between public and private identities

¹ I refer to Sara Payson Willis Parton as Fanny Fern throughout this study. Fern adopted this name as her own in the 1850s, was known by that name both publicly and by her family. Following her marriage to James Parton in 1856, she often signed private correspondence as either "Mrs. James Parton," or as "Mrs. Fanny Parton," or "Fanny Fern Parton." In 1872 she was buried under that name. For an analysis of Fanny Fern's appropriation of her name, see Melissa Homestead, "Every body sees the theft': Fanny Fern and literary proprietorship in antebellum America," *New England Quarterly* 74:2 (June 2001): 210-237; "The Birth of Fanny Fern" in Joyce W. Warren, *Fanny Fern: An Independent Woman* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1992) 90-103.

² William Moulton, Fern's former publisher at the *True Flag*, was angered by her unflattering portrayal of himself as Mr. Tibbetts in *Ruth Hall* and published a series of articles revealing Fern's true identity in his newspaper. He is also believed to be the author of *The Life and Beauties of Fanny Fern* (1855), a spurious biography that defames Fern's work and attacks her personally.

more vividly than any other mid-century American woman writer.³ When considering “the spectacle of Fanny Fern,” as Hawthorne described her, scholars largely focus on the unmasking of Fern in the aftermath of the publication of *Ruth Hall* and her notable success as a woman writer.⁴ Instead, this chapter explores the foundation of Fern’s enduring celebrity, her weekly columns. Compiled over twenty years of writing for weekly and monthly periodicals, Fern’s columns created thousands of points of contact with readers; they acted as spaces that offered an intimate, recurring site for identification between readers and Fern. Her columns were often site of colliding public and private identities, a tension Fern sought to address by managing her public presence, rather than withdrawing entirely from the reading audience.

While Hawthorne referred to her as a “spectacle,” highlighting the purposeful and public nature of her popularity, her family told a different tale. Fern’s granddaughter, Ethel Parton, described her as “passionately resent[ing] intrusions upon her private life.” Fern’s daughter Ellen also described Fern’s “extreme shrinking from publicity.” Ellen wrote, “she always said the public had a right to know an author only as such, and should seek to know nothing of the woman.”⁵ Yet despite Ellen’s claim that her mother shrank from publicity,

³ Mary Kelley, *Private Woman, Public Stage: Literary Domesticity in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984) 135.

⁴ Fern scholarship often either focuses almost exclusively on *Ruth Hall* or compares Fern’s literary success and celebrity to that of her male contemporaries, particularly her brother Nathaniel Parker Willis and Nathaniel Hawthorne. For example, Glenn Hendler and Richard Brodhead both study Fern as a point of comparison to both Hawthorne and Willis, using her primarily as an example of a celebrity woman author with extraordinary sales. Brodhead’s chapter also usefully questions Fern’s position as a public woman. See Hendler, *Public Sentiments: Structures of Feeling in Nineteenth-Century American Literature* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001); Brodhead, *Cultures of Letters: Scenes of Reading and Writing in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993).

⁵ Ellen Parton, letter to anonymous correspondent, February 28, 1899, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College. In this particular letter, Ellen Parton links the entire family’s distaste for publicity in part to the rumors surrounding Fern’s divorce from her second husband, stating that “my mother never spoke of it, or thought it concerned others. Though she never withheld the knowledge of it from anyone connected with her, or likely to be. The stories that man fabricated about her are still heard in echo I believe, and were partly the cause of

Fern's career tells quite a different story. Signing on to write for Robert Bonner's *New York Ledger* put Fern's name in a glaring, public spotlight. Bonner was well known for his flamboyant advertising techniques, taking out full-page advertisements in competing newspapers that ran the line "Fanny Fern writes only for the *New York Ledger*" repeatedly. In one humorous advertisement, Bonner printed a fictitious conversation between the President of the United States and the British prime minister in which the latter expressed his liking of the *Ledger*, "especially now that Fanny Fern writes for it exclusively."⁶ In addition to Bonner's adept publicity, Fern's distinctive style and persona were rooted in details of her personal life, her opinions, and her lifestyle. Fern was savvy about crafting a public image that traded in authenticity, while working to shield "the woman" from the probing public eye.

Fern's continuity at the *Ledger* was also a significant in her enduring celebrity; unlike many of her contemporaries in the periodicals market, she had a reliable print "home" on the editorial page of the *Ledger* that readers came to rely upon. Fern worked for over seventeen years as a columnist at the *New York Ledger*. Under the editorial direction of Robert Bonner, the *Ledger* became a "phenomenon of the time," with circulation numbers of nearly 400,000 immediately before the Civil War.⁷ Fern's publishers Oliver Dyer and

my mother's dread of publicity—which we all share." Ellen's distaste for publicity evidently ran deep. In response to her correspondent's question, "had she written for publication?" Ellen replied emphatically "a thousand times no! Like the south of old, all I want is to be let alone (as to publicity)."

⁶ Warren 149. For more on Bonner's aggressive publicity of both Fern and the *Ledger*, see Warren's chapter "Robert Bonner and James Parton." See also James C. Derby, *Fifty Years Among Authors, Books, and Publishers* (New York: G.W. Carleton, 1884) 200-207.

⁷ Frank Luther Mott, *American Journalism* 3rd ed. (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1962). Mott dubbed the *New York Ledger* as "the greatest literary miscellany" (319). See also Nina Baym, *Novels, Readers, and Reviewers: Responses to Fiction in Antebellum America* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984). Baym identifies the *Ledger* as the "most popular fiction weekly" and describes the format of the paper as oversized and "running about twelve pages an issue" (18).

Robert Bonner insisted that Fern had more readers than any other writer in the country.⁸ Grace Greenwood noted that “thousands [of readers] mobbed the offices of the *Ledger* to have the latest word from Fanny Fern” on publication day.⁹ With the widely accepted practice of “clipping” items not protected under copyright, Fern had a regular audience of hundreds of thousands of diverse and dedicated readers.¹⁰ Fern biographer Florence Bannard Adams contends “Fanny Fern was read as happily by plumbers and freight conductors as by Dickens and Hawthorne, by literary ladies as by run-of-the-mill housewives and working women.”¹¹ In 1860, a critic commented that due to the *Ledger’s* immense circulation, “the brains of the highest and lowest strata were brought into contact and sympathy.”¹² Both Bannard Adams and Fern’s contemporary critic identify the power of the print medium to attract and connect a diverse number of people. Fanny Fern’s diverse and multitudinous readers are brought into “contact and sympathy” with one another and with Fern herself through the act of reading her column.

Ethel Parton emphasized the reciprocity of Fern’s relationship with her readers:

With every passing year, her hold on the public strengthened, rather than waned. They felt they knew her better and better, as indeed she grew to know them...She became to thousands as real a person as their next-door neighbor. Her weekly visit,

⁸ Florence Bannard Adams, *Fanny Fern, or, A Pair of Flaming Shoes* (Trenton: Hermitage Press, Inc., 1966) 17.

⁹ Quoted in James Parton, ed. *Eminent Women of the Age* (Hartford: S.M. Betts & Company, 1869).

¹⁰ The practice of reprinting popular items is illustrated in *Ruth Hall* when Ruth’s work is copied to numerous other papers, including her brother’s literary journal. Horace Gates, the assistant editor who ridicules Hyacinth Ellett for using his sister’s work without pay, is modeled after James Parton, who worked as an editorial assistant at Willis’s *Home Journal*. “Finding these Fern Leaves afloat in the papers,” Parton wrote, “and having no suspicion that the author was in any way related to my chief, I used to clip them diligently, and scarcely a week passed without one being published in the paper.” Parton, forwarding the “unknown” Fanny Fern a tribute poem to her that had been sent to the *Home Journal* office, enclosed a personal letter telling her to come to New York: “Dear Unknown: New York is the place for you. You will find subjects here starting up in your path wherever you go. Come! Come! Come!” Quoted in James Parton, ed. *Fanny Fern: A Memorial Volume* (New York: G.W. Carleton & Co., 1873) 54.

¹¹ Bannard Adams 19.

¹² Bannard Adams 19.

by way of the *New York Ledger*, was an event eagerly looked forward to. When the *Ledger* arrived in a family of good size, with father and mother and grown sons and daughters, many were the quarrels as to who should have the first reading of Fanny Fern's column.¹³

Fern became “as real a person as [a] next door neighbor” to her readers because she incorporated herself and her experiences in her writing, which Parton compares to an embodied “weekly visit.” Her readers reciprocated by sharing their grievances, concerns, and joys with Fern in their letters. Yet Parton, who was raised in Fern's home, acknowledges the inherent contradiction in Fern's use of her private life as fodder for her very public column:

This ready sharing with the public of small domestic scenes and conversations by one who so passionately resented intrusions upon her private life is perhaps paradoxical, but less so than it seems at a first glance. There is a great difference between a friendly ‘won't you step in a moment?’ to a stranger at the gate, and viewing with complacency the flattened nose of a Peeping Tom pressed against the window pane (*EP* 159).

As Parton astutely recognizes, there is something “paradoxical” in Fern's willingness to “shar[e] with the public” episodes from her domestic life, as well as her own personal preferences and opinions. This willingness on the part of Fern to share herself and her domestic life with her readers challenges the notion that her public persona was thrust upon her without her consent or contribution. Yet Parton's comment also nuances this willingness in a crucial way: she emphasizes Fern's role in managing the intrusive public and their response to her work. Fern made the choice to ask her readers to briefly step into her life and her domestic space. Readers, Parton's “stranger[s] at the gate,” are asked to share in Fern's life when she so chooses. This ideal scenario, with Fern in control of who enters her private space, is contrasted to the “flattened nose of a Peeping Tom pressed against the window pane,” whose intrusive gaze disrupts Fern's ability to manage the complex interplay

¹³ Ethel Parton, “Fanny Fern: An Informal Biography,” unpublished manuscript in the Sophia Smith Collection at Smith College, 161. All subsequent references to this text will be included parenthetically in the text, distinguished by *EP*.

between her public and private lives. Yet despite her efforts to manage her fans and her public image, Fern was never able to separate completely the woman from the author. Readers believed they recognized Fern's authentic personality in her writing; as one reader confided in a fan letter, "I like you and your writings."¹⁴ For Fanny Fern, managing her popularity and the ensuing demands for intimacy, friendship and sympathy from her readers was a challenge. The underlying issue for Fern was one of control: could she keep her public "at the gate," as Ethel Parton described, only allowing a select few moments of her private life to be shared, or would her life be overrun by "peeping Tom's" with their noses pressed up against her proverbial windowpanes, uninvited and unavoidable?

"a woman all the world knows"

Fanny Fern knew that she was a celebrity; it was impossible to ignore, yet her public recognition of her status as a cultural icon was often criticized. In her 1856 column "Come On, MacDuff," Fern narrates a situation that speaks to her celebrity: a female reader has requested that a newspaper editor include negative reviews of Fern's work; the editor refuses such a request, responding, "why should we 'oblige a lady' whom we do not know, and at the same time disoblige a lady whom all the world knows?"¹⁵ Criticized for being "unwomanly" in her recognition of fame and success, Fern quipped, "when a lady has had a mud scow and a hand cart, a steamboat and a hotel, a perfume and a score of babies, not to mention tobacco and music, named for her; and when she is told what her name is wherever she goes, till she is sick of the sound of it, that she does not earn for herself a boxed ear

¹⁴ James Parton reproduced this brief letter dated June 24, 1854 from G.M. Spencer of Cincinnati as "a specimen of a kind of letter of which she received many hundreds, but this is the only one of a general nature, from a stranger, which she preserved" (MV 60).

¹⁵ Fern, "Come on Macduff," *New York Ledger* (13 May 1856). Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College.

when she couples with it the word ‘famous.’”¹⁶ Fern draws upon the extensive usage of her name in both public enterprises (a perfume, a hotel, sheet music, a steamboat) and in private situations (a baby’s name) to support her claim to fame.¹⁷ Fern’s status as a celebrity author enabled intimate exchange between Fern and her readers by encouraging sales, inspiring new editions of works, and encouraging the mass marketing machine to develop celebrity “spin-off” products, such as a Fanny Fern perfume, a steamboat, sheet music and autographed cartes de visite photographs.

As Fern’s popularity and publicity both increased, speculation arose as to the physical person of Fanny Fern. In fact, as the name Fanny Fern became a commodity, Fern’s corporeal person inevitably entered the marketplace of gossip sheets and rumor. Before it was publicly known that Fanny Fern was Sara Willis, critics speculated as to Fern’s gender, arguing that a woman could not write in such a candid style. An editorial in the May 1853 *Musical World and Times* commented on the speculation surrounding Fern’s gender: “It was argued by many, that the writer of such searching, forcible, and, withal, common-sense articles as sometimes came from the unknown pen, must be a man; --the public being unwilling to give femininity credit for the power and courage necessary for their production.”¹⁸ One subscriber to the *Olive Branch* wrote a poem that appeared in the April 10, 1852 edition and began: “Oh mirth-provoking Fanny/Pray tell me if you will/What sort

¹⁶ Quoted in Warren 179.

¹⁷ James Parton recalled that Fern had a drawer full of daguerreotypes of babies named after her: “These were some of the few treasures that Fern kept from her readers” (MV).

¹⁸ Quoted in Warren 101. *The Musical World and Times* was edited by Fern’s younger brother, Richard Storrs Willis. Willis, who had been in Europe for over 7 years, was also unaware that his sister, Sara, was Fanny Fern. After Fern moved to New York in 1854, she wrote briefly for *The Musical World and Times* before being hired by Robert Bonner to write exclusively for the *New York Ledger* in 1855.

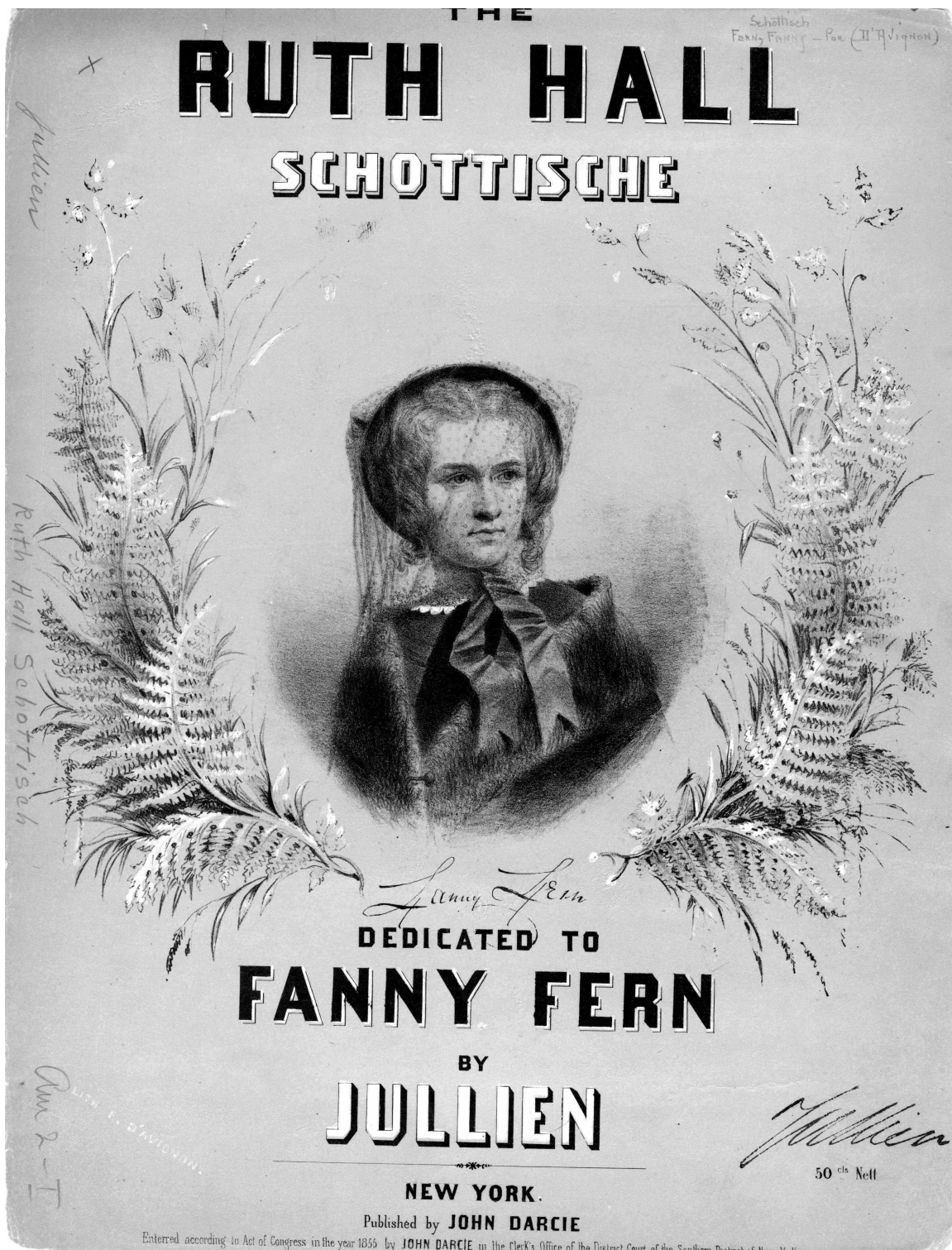


Figure 5.1. "The Ruth Hall Schottische," dedicated to Fanny Fern by Jullien. Courtesy of the Music Division, New York Public Library.

of being you really are/And whether a Jack or a Jill.”¹⁹ The general confusion surrounding Fern’s identity in the years between 1851 and 1855 is characterized by an anecdote in one of Fern’s letters. While traveling back to New York, a young boy attempted to sell Fern a copy of *Fern Leaves*; when she questioned him about the author’s identity, he replied: “Don’t know. She’s first this person, and then that: now a man, and then a woman; somebody says she’s everybody, and everybody says she’s some.”²⁰

Following the publication of *Ruth Hall* and the revelation of Fern’s true identity, speculation as to Fern’s gender was often replaced by queries and gossip about her physical appearance. Fern frequently referred to the speculation about her physical appearance in her columns, writing in “Some Gossip about Myself”: “A correspondent inquires how I look? Am I tall? Have I dark, or light complexion? And what color are my eyes?”²¹ Fern recalls with some frustration one reader’s “misreading” of her appearance in “Some Gossip about Myself”:

[A] man who got into my parlor under cover of “New Year’s calls,” after breathlessly inspecting me, remarked, “Well, now, I *am* agreeably disappointed! I thought that from the way you *writ*, that you were a great six-footer of a woman, with snapping black eyes and a big waist, and I *am* pleased to find you looking so soft and femi-*nine*!” (*GS* 186-187).

In Fern’s retelling, the uninvited reader literally misreads Fern; expecting to find “a great six-footer of a woman,” he is surprised to discover that she is instead “so soft and femi-*nine*.” The reader correlates her writing style with masculine features such as “snapping black eyes” and “a big waist. There is also an interesting note of frustration in Fern’s description of the

¹⁹ Quoted in Warren 101.

²⁰ From *The Musical World and Times* (13 August 1853). Quoted in Warren 117.

²¹ Fanny Fern, *Ginger-Snaps* (New York: Carleton, Publishers, 1870) 185. All subsequent references to this text will be included parenthetically, distinguished by *GS*.

reader who gained access to her parlor “under cover.” The man’s “inspection” of Fern, after falsely gaining access to her private, domestic space clearly disturbs her.²²

Such misrepresentations of her appearance were so persistent that Fern mocked them in a faux review of *Fern Leaves* that appeared in the *New York Ledger* on the same page as her weekly column:

This little volume has just been laid upon our table. The publishers have done all they could in the way of outward adornment. No doubt it will be welcomed by those who admire this lady’s style of writing; we confess ourselves not to be of the number. We have never seen Fanny Fern, nor do we desire to do so. We imagine her to be a muscular, black-browed grenadier-looking female, who would be more at home in a boxing gallery than a parlor (*EP* 161).

Fern’s review of *Fern Leaves* mocks the ease with which a review of her printed work often turned into a review of Fern herself, noting how readers and reviewers “imagined” her physical appearance to be consistent with her writing style. Similar to the reader in “Some Gossip about Myself,” Fern represents herself in masculine terms as a “muscular” author “more at home in a boxing gallery than a parlor.” In “Some Hints to Editors,” Fern addresses this tendency of reviewers to conflate author with text: “[W]hat a pity when editors review a woman’s book that they so often fall into the error of reviewing the *woman* instead” (*GS* 98). Fern records additional misrepresentations of her appearance by editors reviewing her work: “True, black hair has often been awarded me, instead of light, by these scribblers, ‘who were on very intimate terms with me,’ and I have measured six feet in height instead of four and a half” (*GS* 102).²³ In acknowledging these instances of “mistaken

²² For an interesting reading of the misrepresentations of Fern’s appearance, see, Laura Laffrado, “‘I Thought from the Way You Writ, That You Were a Great Six-Footer of A Woman’: Gender and the Public Voice in Fanny Fern’s Newspaper Essays” *In Her Own Voice: Nineteenth-Century American Women Essayists*, ed. Sherry Lee Linkon (New York: Garland, 1997).

²³ In “Some Hints to Editors,” Fern describes “a practice of certain penny-a-liners” which results in frequent misrepresentations of herself and other public figures: “their personal descriptions of public persons, male and female, which are often wholly false—they having mistaken some one else for the individual they wished to describe; and if certain of the identity, generally ‘doing’ the description in the worst possible taste” (*GS* 100).

identity,” Fern is acknowledging and mocking the conflation of her candid writing style with a masculine physical appearance. Laura Laffrado argues that Fern’s practice of “citing incidents of *misrepresentation*” of her body allows her to maintain a more fluid physical and authorial self in public.²⁴ While Laffrado’s contention addresses the value of such purposeful misrepresentation, in both “Some Gossip about Myself” and “Some Hints to editors,” Fern explicitly corrects these “misrepresentations” with a hyper-feminine representation of herself: petite, blond, slight, and above all, feminine. She pushes against a perception of grotesque masculinity that would drive her from the parlor by instead reinforcing her femininity. Finally, she exposes the fraud hidden behind many assumptions of “intimacy,” reinforcing the notion that only she is capable of distributing reliable information about the person of Fanny Fern.

In addition to speculation about her physical appearance, Fern’s prominent status as a celebrity allowed editors and other strangers to assume terms of intimacy with her. Yet as “Some Gossip About Myself” recounts, such presumptions of intimacy could be problematic for a woman in the public eye:

One evening I was seated at the opera, waiting patiently for the performances to begin. In two orchestra chairs, directly in front of me, sat a lady and a gentleman, both utter strangers to me. Said the *gentleman* to his companion, ‘do you see that lady who has just entered yonder box?’ pointing, as he did so, to the gallery; ‘well, that is Fanny Fern.’—‘You know her, then?’ asked that lady.—‘Intimately,’ replied this strange gentleman—‘*intimately*’... Naturally desiring to know how I did look, I used my opera glass. The lady was tall, handsome, graceful and beautifully dressed. The

²⁴ Laffrado 86. In addition to “Some Gossip About Myself,” several of Fern’s columns such as “A Rainy Day” (*New York Ledger*, February 1858); “Peeps from Under a Parasol” (a series in the *New York Ledger* in the spring of 1856) and “Some Hints to Editors” (*Ginger-Snaps*) describe instances in which her identity, represented by her appearance or gender, was misrepresented. In “Peeps from Under a Parasol” Fern again toys with the notion of describing the appearances of public figures in print. “People describe me, without saying ‘by your leave,’” wrote Fern, “[and] a little thought has just occurred to me that two can play that game!” Fern went on to write a series of articles for the *Ledger* humorously describing prominent figures such as Henry Ward Beecher (a friend of Fern’s), Richard Storrs Willis (her brother and editor of *The Musical World and Times*), Walt Whitman (whose *Leaves of Grass* she reviewed in the *Ledger*), and her husband, James Parton. Quotations from this essay series are drawn from Joyce Warren’s, *Ruth Hall and Other Writings*, 270-274.

gentleman who accompanied me began to grow red in the face, at the statement of my 'intimate' acquaintance, and insisted on a word with him... (GS 185-186).

This anecdote is one of many wherein Fern is misrepresented due to her status as a celebrity and it specifically interrogates the meaning of intimacy for a public woman. A man dubbed a "stranger" by Fern assumes an intimacy with her that is construed by her companion, most likely her husband James Parton, as an insinuation of sexual intimacy. Of course, the added irony is that Fern, although well known to the public, was *not* the lady pointed out by the gentleman. Thus, Fern's identity was capable of being misconstrued once it entered the public forum.²⁵ Although Fern assumes a playful note of dismissal at the conclusion of the anecdote, her ironic stress on the word "gentleman" evinces her disgust at a man who would claim a false insinuation of intimacy with her.²⁶ Clearly, then, the possibilities for intimate connection with Fern are complicated by her status as a public figure and the threat of public insinuations of improper intimacy.

The public's obsession with Fern's corporeal self represents an interesting moment when the boundaries between public and private are collapsed around her person. Readers' speculations about her physical appearance represent moments where strangers sought to know and understand Fern by reading her face, clothes, and overall appearance in order to gain some insight into her character. Likewise, insinuations of intimacy with Fanny Fern represent moments when the threatening "peeping Tom's," whom Fern sought to keep at a distance from her personal life, had unnerving access to her physical body. The intense gaze

²⁵ Melissa Homestead addresses these questions of publicity and womanhood within the context of Fern's authorial reputation. For Homestead, incursions on Fern's identity, in the form of copy-cat writers, or in the practice of reprinting her works in other newspapers consisted of a violation of her identity and represented a threat to her "reputation": "the more widely her sketches are reprinted, the more frequently strange men claim false alliances with her, making her look like a woman of easy virtue" (213).

²⁶ In "Have We Any Men Among Us?" (*The Musical World and Times*, September 24, 1853) she expresses similar frustration with men who talk of "intimate" relationships with her: "Time was, when whiskered braggadocios in railroad cars and steamboats did not assert, (in blissful ignorance that they were looking the lady authoress straight in the face!) that they were 'on the most intimate terms of friendship with her!'" (RH 262).

of the public was yet another means by which strangers sought to “know” Fern, the lady “all the world knows.” As one reviewer for *Putnam’s* commented in 1854, “Would you lay bare the secret workings of your heart...then write a novel.”²⁷ Fern’s weekly columns and autobiographical fiction certainly did “lay her heart bare” before the public, yet, as Ethel Parton noted, “paradoxically,” she chose to write about her personal life and opinions throughout her entire career.²⁸ Nathaniel Parker Willis expressed a similar interest in establishing personal connections with his readers. Willis wanted to foster a sense of familiar community with readers, describing his desire “to dissolve the distance between reader and author into an uncommon intimacy.”²⁹ Willis’ expressed desire to “dissolve the distance” between author and reader was a driving force in Fern’s weekly newspaper columns, as well. The “uncommon intimacy” sought by N.P. Willis and the “intimate relationships” between Fern and her readers define intimacy as a sense of deep, emotional connection between individuals, often strangers, connected by an emotional bond of a shared experience, a shared text, or a shared understanding.

“a Dear though unseen Friend”

James Parton described the “great heap of letters and other mementos” that Fern received from readers: “As she addressed through the *Ledger*, every week, a multitude of

²⁷ Quoted in Baym, *Novels, Readers, and Reviewers* 31.

²⁸ For example, Fern’s unwillingness to reveal her real name in an 1853 letter to Derby and Miller, the publishers of *Fern Leaves*, is an example of her extreme unwillingness to reveal her private identity: “My own name is—I had rather be shot than tell! But if I must I must,” Sara P. Farrington. In revealing it, I trust to your gentlemanly honor to keep it strictly secret” (quoted in Warren 108). As Ellen Parton wrote, Fern believed that her identities as an “author” and as a “woman” should be kept separate; her agony over revealing her real name, one that had been mired in controversy following the dissolution of her second marriage, is apparent in her communication with her publishers. Fern, obviously anxious about revealing her private identity, calls upon her publisher’s “gentlemanly honor” to keep her secret.

²⁹ Quoted in Thomas N. Baker, *Sentiment and Celebrity: Nathaniel Parker Willis and the Trials of Literary Fame* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999) 44.

readers, to be numbered by hundreds of thousands, she received many responses of various kinds, most of which were of necessity destroyed almost as soon as read” (*MV* 60). The sheer volume and variety of reader letters that Fern received was documented by Ethel Parton:

There was never a day when the letterbox behind the tall mahogany doors of 303 Eighteenth Street was empty, often it was overflowing. The number and variety of her letters were a marvel to Fanny Fern’s household...There were letters of touching, ridiculous or appalling frankness, detailing the writers’ personal troubles, sometimes just for the satisfaction of pouring out the story to the sympathetic friend they felt Fanny Fern to be; often to ask advice (*EP* 146).

Parton emphasizes both the consistency and the personal nature of readers’ letters. Readers seeking advice and those pouring out their “personal troubles” considered Fern to be a “sympathetic friend” they could trust. As a result, Fern’s home was inundated with letters from her readers. This notion of intimate exchange via the letter was a popular one in the nineteenth-century. Elizabeth Hewitt points to the letter’s “capacity to collapse distances between persons,” a notion illustrated by Donald Grant Mitchell’s claim in *Reveries of a Bachelor* (1850) that letters were “heart talkers.”³⁰ Despite geographical distance, letters were invested with the capacity to “speak” to the hearts of individuals. Ethel Parton humorously recounts some of the kinds of letters Fern received from readers:

[on] subjects ranging from how to manage drunken husbands, to ‘which ought to give in, man or woman?’ when the happiness of a married couple was threatened because he yearned for onions and she loathed them. The whole gamut of ‘in-law’ difficulties was presented for her opinion. Pathetically lonely and neglected old people wrote to her; so did absurd and agonized adolescents. A pretty girl whose looks were spoiled by a red nose wrote from the depths of despair, to know if there wasn’t anything to whiten it...A despairing youth of nineteen, who had contemplated suicide but decided to write to her instead, asked what he could do to reinstate himself in the affections of his beloved, who had dismissed him forever (*EP* 163).

³⁰ Elizabeth Hewitt, *Correspondence in American Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004) 15; Donald Grant Mitchell, *Reveries of a Bachelor, or, A Book of the Heart* (New York: Baker and Scribner, 1850).

Parton's list is notable for the rather quotidian nature of the inquiries; questions of personal relationships and fashion are intermingled with the "pathetic" letters from elderly readers and the "absurd" complaints of adolescents. Ethel Parton's description claims that Fern's readers considered Fern's columns as part of a conversation; their letters represent one part of the dialogue and her columns and personal replies the other. Regardless of their motives for writing, it is clear from Parton's description that Fern's fans felt comfortable reaching out to her in their letters.³¹

Fern often lamented that she could not answer all of the letters she received, noting in her August 6, 1870 column in the *New York Ledger*: "I wish I could ease all the burdens of the persons who write to me for sympathy and advice."³² Yet, according to Ethel Parton, she only responded publicly to her reader's requests for aid or advice when she thought they would be interesting to her larger readership, answering her other readers in private correspondence (*EP* 163). In one column, Fern responds to a reader's question as to whether she should marry an "old bachelor." In "A Question, and its Answer" Fern advises her reader, Mary, that she should not marry the bachelor because his habits will be "as

³¹ Ethel Parton's description of the fan mail received by Fern and the direct references to reader letters Fern made in her weekly column support the notion that the "fan" letters featured in Fern's autobiographical *Ruth Hall* are representative of the reader responses from men and women she received for over two decades. In "A Key To *Ruth Hall*," included in the spurious *Life and Beauties of Fanny Fern*, the anonymous author, believed to be William Moulton, criticizes the novel at length concluding that, "towards the close, for want of better matter, we are surfeited with letters from people nobody cares anything about..." (67). Part of a large-scale attack on Fanny Fern and her work, it is no wonder that Moulton misreads the letters included in *Ruth Hall*. The letters represent important sites of identification between Fern and her readers. Ruth's reactions as she reads the "letters from people nobody cares anything about," illustrate that Ruth, and by autobiographical extension Fanny Fern, is capable of identifying with her readers; she bridges gaps of distance, gender and experience in her ability to "care" about her readers. Ruth's ability to distribute her sympathy amongst them in the form of her written replies corresponds to Fern's own interest in connecting with her readers through her printed words. As if the "poisonous" nature of the book were not apparent enough, the cover of the 1855 unauthorized biography features a stamped image of a serpent curved around a writing implement. The serpent's tongue appears to lash out at the tip of the pen, perhaps an attempt to represent the "venomous" nature of Fern's writing. For more on Ruth's verbal replies to the letters, see Nancy A. Walker, *Fanny Fern* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1993). Walker argues that Ruth gains independence and selfhood through her commentary on the letters she receives (60).

³² Quoted in Warren 259.

unbending as a church-steeple” (MV 422). Mary’s case is an example of Fern’s role as a “public mentor,” a role she took very seriously.³³ Fanny Fern also noted her ability to influence her readers in her column “My First Convert”: “I have just received a letter from a soldier...announcing himself a convert to the renunciation of tobacco, through my ministrations on this subject.”³⁴ Fern goes on to quote the soldier, who thanks Fern for “the kind encouragement” her column provided him during his struggle to “renounce tobacco.” Fern’s ability to influence her readers is a sign of her significance in their lives, but this significance is also reciprocated; readers are also able to influence her. Fern resolves to continue her campaign against tobacco after receiving such encouragement, for example.

Many of Fern’s correspondents establish intimate connections with her by literally invoking familial metaphors or names in their letters. One reader wrote to Fern, “I know what you are to me in the weekly visits of the *Olive Branch*—a kind, loving sister, with a flashing smile that breaks through the drolleries, making me long to shake hands with you.”³⁵ In *Ruth Hall*, Fern describes one fictional correspondent named Mary Andrews who attempts to break through the barriers of print and establish physical contact with Ruth. After identifying Ruth Hall as “*not* a stranger,” Mary Andrews goes on to make a request of the unknown woman:

The hour so dreaded by all maternity draws near to me. It has been revealed to me in dreams that I shall not survive it. ‘Floy,’ will you be a mother to my babe? I

³³ Warren 258. Elaine Breslaw argues that Fern “considered herself a ‘public writer,’ who by virtue of her position, had a social obligation to discharge, which was to take a position on all social issues” (79). Elaine Breslaw, “Popular Pundit: Fanny Fern and the Emergence of the American Newspaper Columnist,” unpublished master’s thesis in the Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College.

³⁴ Fanny Fern, “My First Convert,” *Caper-Sauce: A Volume of Chit-Chat about Men, Women and Things* (New York: G.W. Carleton & Co., 1872) 299. All subsequent references to *Caper Sauce* will be included parenthetically in the text, distinguished by *CS*.

³⁵ Quoted in Warren 100.

cannot tell you why I put this trust in one whom I have only known through her writings, but something assures me it will be safe with you; that you only can fill my place in the little heart that this moment is pulsating beneath my own...Write me speedily. I shall die content if your arms receive my babe (RH 164).

Mary Andrews' tragic request identifies Ruth in her family sphere, not as a guardian, but as a new mother to Mary's unborn child. Mary expresses puzzlement at why she identifies with a woman "whom I have only known through her writings," yet her willingness to impose upon "Floy" such an intimate duty is evidence of her intense connection to Ruth. As Mary points out, her relationship with Ruth was fostered *only* through print, yet that medium was powerful enough to convey Ruth's personality to the dying mother and to establish her potential to be a mother to the child. Mary's letter also builds a physical connection between the two women. Citing the growing life within her, Mary Andrews assures Ruth that she will be able to "fill my place in the little heart that this moment is pulsating beneath my own." Ruth will replace Mary in the heart of her unborn child, which is now "pulsating" in Mary's own body. By virtue of Ruth's transparent "heart in her writings," identifiable to readers like Mary Andrews, she is able to enter the physical space of her readers and to literally assume a corporeal place in the family.³⁶ Fern uses fictionalized letters like Mary Andrews' to illustrate the emotional bonds established with her readers.

Occasionally, Fern used her column to imaginatively construct and embody her own readership, much as her uninvited New Year's guest had imagined her as "a great six-footer of a woman." Fern builds connections amongst this community of strangers by figuratively imagining them in her writing. In her February 23, 1861 column in the *New York Ledger*, for example, Fern reflects on the importance of both fan letters and their senders:

³⁶ Gillian Brown argues that "Ruth's fans ask too much" of her in their correspondence because, as Mary Andrews notes, Ruth's "heart" is in her writing. Both Fern's and Ruth's readers are motivated to "ask too much" because they feel that they know her and "her heart." See Gillian Brown, *Domestic Individualism: Imagining Self in Nineteenth-Century America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990) 141.

A letter comes to you; then another, till, mayhap if you are lucky, you have done counting them; full of love and appreciation...It may be a man or woman, or child, whose spiritual eyes gaze into yours, ...over miles and seas far away, and [who] claims you for a dear though unseen friend; blessing you for some word of yours that came like a cordial, when heart and soul grew faint, to make life's paths easy to the tired feet. Ah! then your tears fall as you say, *this repays me for all my toil, this is better than a diploma from any college* (emphasis original).³⁷

Fern conjures the image of an unknown man, woman, or child “whose spiritual eyes” are able to travel across “miles and seas far away” in order to identify with Fern. Fern reads letters as she would read faces, allowing the letter to “gaze” at her and “claim [her] for a dear though unseen friend.” Identification and ensuing intimacy between distant individuals is made possible through print; first, Fanny Fern’s words “claim” a reader, and then their response “claims” Fern as the spiritual friendship is established. The language employed by Fern is reminiscent of that used by her fictional creation, Mary Andrews; both refer to the written word’s ability to establish relationships with unknown people, incorporating hearts and eyes in the printed word. For Fern, the literally countless letters from readers represent a twofold reward: an emotional reward of spiritual connection and the practical continuation of her popularity. Fern privileges both forms of reward as “better than a diploma from any college.”

“She sends her little book instead”

Fern’s columns attempt to imagine the unknown reader and acknowledge the intimate connection possible between author and reader through the print medium. But Fern did more than imagine her readers as friends; she frequently personified herself entering the private family space in the form of her books and her weekly column. In her

³⁷ Quoted in Warren 259.

prefaces to her novels and essay collections, Fern often alludes to her place within the family as embodied in the form of her book. The preface to *Rose Clark* (1856) sets the scene for Fern to enter an intimate family circle:

Reader! When the frost curtains the windows, when the wind whistles fiercely at the key-hole, when the bright fire glows, and the tea-tray is removed, and father in his slippered feet lolls in his arm-chair, and mother with her nimble needle ‘makes aul claes look amaisht as weel as new,’ [sic] and grandmamma draws closer to the chimney-corner, and Tommy with his plate of chestnuts nestles contentedly at her feet; then let my unpretending story be read. For such an hour, for such an audience, was it written.³⁸

Fern carefully inventories the family for which her story was written, recounting the details of their domestic space. Fern’s imaginary family depicts an expanding audience of what Baym identifies as “the newly literate masses” with leisure time in which to pursue reading novels.³⁹ It is important to note that for the family described in the preface, the act of reading does not occur individually; Fern devotes nearly the entire preface to describing the family who gathers *together* to read her “unpretending story.”⁴⁰ Fern’s prefatory assertion that *Rose Clark* was written, “for such an hour, for such an audience,” is evidence of her ability to enter into her readers’ domestic spaces and for her novel and herself to become, in the words of the *Knickerbocker* reviewer, “member[s] of the family.” Fern also envisions entering her reader’s homes in the preface to *Ruth Hall*, citing her ability to “enter unceremoniously and unannounced, into people’s houses, without stopping to ring the bell. Whether you will

³⁸ Fanny Fern, *Rose Clark* (New York: Mason Brothers, 1856). All subsequent references will be included in the text, distinguished by RC.

³⁹ Baym, *Novel Readers, and Reviewers* 29. Baym continues, “the novel...and its dominant position represented less a change of taste in an existing audience than a change in the makeup of the audience for the written word” (29). Her work at the *New York Ledger*, with its broad circulation and diverse readership, brought Fern into contact with the changing “audience for the written word,” identified by Baym.

⁴⁰ See Amy Thomas, “Literature in Newsprint: Antebellum Family Newspapers and the Uses of Reading,” *Reading Books, Essays on the Materials Text and Literature in America*, eds. Michele Moylan and Lane Stiles (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1996). Thomas argues that antebellum readers read in order to develop a sense of community with other readers, citing, for example, reading the news as an opportunity to connect with international communities.

fancy this primitive mode of calling, whether you will like the company to which it introduces you, or—whether you will like the book at all, I cannot tell” (*RH* Preface). Her prefatory act of breaking and entering equates the “mode of calling” to the reading of her book and the “company introduce[d]” to the physical object, her book. Fern recognizes her ability to “enter unceremoniously and unannounced” because she is clothed in her text.

Fern’s novels and collections extended the process of intimate identification through print initiated in her “weekly visits” via the *New York Ledger*. Just as Fern’s readers invite her into their families and domestic spaces in their letters, Fern reciprocates by writing herself into those spaces. Hence, in the prefaces to *Fern Leaves from Fanny’s Portfolio* (First and Second Series, 1853), *Little Ferns for Fanny’s Little Friends* (1854) and *Ginger Snaps* (1870) Fern imagines herself in the presence of her readers as they read her collections. In the preface to *Fern Leaves*, Fern invites the reader to “imagine me peeping over his shoulder, quite happy should he pay me the impromptu compliment of a smile or a tear, it is possible we may come to a good understanding by the time the book shall have been perused.”⁴¹ Figuratively hovering over her reader, Fern requests an emotional response to both her work and herself in order to “come to an understanding” with her reader. In her preface to *Ginger Snaps*, she describes the act of reading her work on the railroad car, under a shady tree, waiting for a tardy husband, nursing a baby, as well as the emotional responses of her readers as they respond to her written words. Perhaps Fern’s most striking act of identification occurs in her writing for children. In essays such as “Children’s Rights” and “A Peep through my Quizzing Glass,” Fern describes her desire to “mother” and care for the children who read her work. The preface to her children’s book, *Fern Leaves for Fanny’s Little Friends* (1854) attempts to negotiate her relationship with her young readers: “Aunt Fanny has written you

⁴¹ Fanny Fern, *Fern Leaves from Fanny’s Portfolio* (Auburn: Derby and Miller, 1853).

some stories, which she hopes will please and divert you. She would rather have come to you, and *told* them, that she might have seen your bright faces; but as that could not be, she sends her little book instead. Perhaps you will sometime come and see her, and *then* won't we have a nice time telling stories?"⁴² Here "Aunt Fanny" indulges in a fantasy wherein she visits each child who reads her stories. Recognizing the impossibility of realizing a tangible connection with each of her young readers, she lights upon the perfect substitute: "she sends her little book instead." Aunt Fanny subsumes and incorporates herself into "her little book," allowing her "little friends" to know her through her words, in lieu of an actual meeting. Ultimately Fern blames her inability to meet her young readers on the fact she can't tell them where she lives, highlighting the ever-present tension between public and private identities in her work. Her reluctance echoes the concern of the little girl who discovered Fern's home, only to shy away from a personal encounter so she would not be "just like any other little girl." In both cases both are aware that a face-to-face encounter would complicate the relationship that exists via the print medium. Yet, just as Mr. Walter's familial relationship with Ruth is always complicated by his business interest in her work in *Ruth Hall*, so is Fanny Fern's desire to enter the private family spaces of her readers. Fern was, after all, a writer who wanted to sell books, just as her readers were consumers with the power to purchase them. As Melissa Homestead argues, fantasies of reader-author exchange in Fern's columns and novels act as a protected space for an uncomfortable kind of domestic consumption that traded upon intimacy.⁴³

⁴² Fanny Fern, *Fern Leaves for Fanny's Little Friends* (Auburn: Derby and Miller, 1854).

⁴³ According to Homestead, "[while] other scenes in the novel celebrate Ruth's possession of the literary text as a commodity that may be sold, the scenes of private author-reader exchange establish a zone in which domestic production and consumption exist as transactions protected from the insecurity of the marketplace" (226). For more on women writers' negotiations of the marketplace, see Ann D. Wood, "The 'Scribbling Women' and Fanny Fern: Why Women Wrote" *American Quarterly* 23:1 (Spring 1971): 3-24.

“before the public stark naked”

Fern referred to her anxieties about her public persona in her columns and occasionally explored her family’s reactions to her public life and its demands upon her in a series of columns focused on “Mr. and Mrs. Pax.” “Tom Pax” was a foil for James Parton, whom Fern married in 1856. One month following her marriage to Parton, Fern published her second column about Tom Pax in the *New York Ledger* entitled, “Tom Pax’s Conjugal Soliloquy.” In the column, the newlywed Tom Pax reflects on what it means to be married to a writer: “Mrs. Pax is an authoress. I knew it when I married her. I liked the idea. I had not tried it then. I had not a clear idea what it was to have one’s wife belong to the public” (MV 417). While it cannot be surmised to what extent Tom Pax’s concerns echo those of James Parton, Fern’s representation of the strain placed on a marriage by her career is significant. The notion of possession, to whom or what Tom’s wife belongs to, is important in the column as Tom Pax attempts to reconcile his wife’s devotion to her employer, “The Weekly Monopolizer.” Furthermore, Pax laments that “the press in speaking of her by her *nom-de-plume* would call her ‘OUR Julia’” and asks the editor of the “Weekly Monopolizer...as a man—as a Christian—as a husband—if he thinks it right—if it is doing as he would be done by—to monopolize my wife’s thoughts as early as five o’clock in the morning?” (MV 419).⁴⁴ His anxiety over sharing his wife’s thoughts with her editor, or her name with the public press who consider her “Our Julia,” signifies the strain that Fern’s weekly column and her public persona placed upon her private, domestic life. The anxiety over his wife’s position in the public and the target of her early morning thoughts

⁴⁴ Tom Pax’s fictional concern about his wife “belonging to the public” was similarly voiced by Lydia Sigourney’s husband, who questioned “why a man would value or desire a wife who was public property”? Quoted in Eliza Richards, *Gender and the Poetics of Reception in Poe’s Circle* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004) 65.

hinges on similar concerns expressed in “Some Gossip about Myself”: the assumption of unfounded and sexually suggestive intimacy with Fern.

In “A Literary Couple,” an 1867 article for *Galaxy* magazine, Fern reflects again upon the literary marriage between herself and James Parton, under the guise of “Pamela Penfeather.”⁴⁵ Explaining why she did not “bury myself in Penfeather’s shirt-fronts, or crush myself under his household iron” after her marriage, she explains her desire to continue writing: “I remarked to him on our wedding day, ‘Penfeather, although matrimonially we are one, literarily we are two. Marrying me, you didn’t marry my pen. That is going still to wag on in single blessedness. Your divine afflatus is one thing; mine another.’ This was agreed upon in that halcyon hour.” Fern emphasizes the separation of her work as an author and her private life by declaring, “you didn’t marry my pen.” Yet, Fern allows Mr. Penfeather to have the last word on the trials of a literary marriage in “A Literary Couple”; after expressing similar sentiment to those of Tom Pax on what a “literary wife” is *really* like, Penfeather expresses frustration over his wife’s public persona:

Then-what sacredness is there about a man’s literary wife? Do people address her as Mrs. Penfeather? Not at all. It is, There goes Pamela, and How dy’e do Pamela? And have you read Pamela’s book or article. Every whipper-snapper writers letters to her; and who knows what she answers? She has requests for her autograph, and her picture, and a lock of her hair, till she gets so confoundedly inflated that no matrimonial cord will hold her down. She has piles of correspondence, both before and since her marriage. Yes, sir, *since*!...⁴⁶

As with the character of Tom Pax, Fern uses the literary husband to voice frustrations about the demands associated with her celebrity. Fern again emphasizes the familiarity the public feels toward “Pamela,” represented by their use of her first name, and recounts Mr. Penfeather’s anxiety over the “sacredness” of his literary wife. Penfeather’s virulent attack against public

⁴⁵ Fern’s essay, “Literary People” also humorously recounts the trials of a married literary couple; see Fern, *Folly as it Flies* (New York: G.W. Carleton and Co. Publishers, 1868).

⁴⁶ Quoted in Warren 217-218.

intrusions in Pamela's private life is especially interesting, as he voices disgust at the "whipper snappers" who send her "piles of correspondence." Most notably, he objects to the requests of these letter writers by noting that their correspondence continues after her marriage. She continues to have a public identity, even after being subsumed, both metaphorically and legally, into a husband's identity.

The tension Fern expresses through Mr. Penfeather about the role of her public persona within her private life—she was invariably "Fanny" not Mrs. Parton to the public—relates to Fern's own vulnerability as a female celebrity. As "Some Gossip about Myself" and "Some Hints to Editors" illustrate, Fern's identity was vulnerable in the public forum, not in spite of her popularity and celebrity, but because of it. The scope of her celebrity made it impossible for her to manage all of the representations of herself or her name in the public sphere. In an 1855 letter to his publisher George Ticknor, Nathaniel Hawthorne alludes to Fern's vulnerability as a public figure:

The woman [Fern] writes as if the devil was in her; and that is the only condition under which a woman ever writes anything worth reading. Generally women write like emasculated men, and are only distinguished from male authors by greater feebleness and folly; but when they throw off the restraints of decency, and come before the public stark naked, as it were—then their books are sure to possess character and value.⁴⁷

Hawthorne succinctly captures the qualities that fueled Fern's celebrity: her vulnerability and accessibility. Fern's ability and desire to make herself available and "knowable" through the medium of her columns, thereby counteracting the anonymity of the print medium, was for some readers and critics akin to indecency. Hawthorne locates Fern's success in her ability to "throw off the restraints of decency and come before the public stark naked." His image is significant in that it again reiterates Fern's vulnerability in the public forum and hints at the

⁴⁷ Quoted in Warren 121.

scandal that followed her early career.⁴⁸ The transparency between Fern and her readers, or her “stark nakedness,” is what fueled the intimate relationship between author and reader. Her intensely personal style and her cultivation of intimacy with her readers made her startlingly vulnerable, and her unique status as “a weekly visitor” made the person of Fanny Fern accessible to the public.

This vulnerability and accessibility to her readers was a key factor in Fern’s success; as Elaine Breslaw argues, “the public knew who she was and was able to associate her column with a particular known individual.” Readers’ assumptions that they could indeed “know” Fanny Fern led directly to “the intimate relationship between columnist and reader.”⁴⁹ Yet, this “intimate relationship” between Fern and her readers could also result in threatening breaches of privacy and security. As Ethel Parton explained, Fern worked to prevent “peeping Tom’s” from invading her privacy. Yet while most readers accepted the print boundary that separated them from Fern’s domestic and physical space, a long-standing series of burglaries at Fern’s home prove that others did not respect such distinctions between public and private. As both Ethel Parton and James Parton relate, Fern’s column provoked a “startling response from professional crooks.”⁵⁰ In December 1871, after the fifth burglary of her home in as many years, Fern protested in her column:

This is the *fifth* time I have been honored by a visit from burglars. Being an author, and the wife of an author, I can never cease wondering at this distinguishing mark of their preference...What there is stunning in the appearance of our quiet domicile,

⁴⁸ In her “Informal Biography,” Ethel Parton notes that Fern’s celebrity and success became much less controversial later in her life. James Parton acknowledges Fern’s initial “ignorance of the world” and observes “to this cause alone is to be attributed an occasional freedom of expression in her earlier writings, which offended some critics” (MV 55).

⁴⁹ Breslaw 72, 74. Breslaw also claims that “the basis of [Fern’s] popularity lay in the personal and humanitarian aspects of her column. She exploited her personality and the intimate details of her life for the entertainment of her readers...” (81).

⁵⁰ Ethel Parton 13. Fern’s protesting column notes the police constable’s reaction to the most recent burglary: “Oh, yes; Parton’s house is entered *reg-lar* once a year.”

looked at burglar-wise, I can't imagine...there are plenty of my other neighbors who offer more inducements than I can hold out: why then do they always come to me? (*MV* 67).

Why did burglars repeatedly break into Fern's home? Fern's interrogation into why her home was so frequently burglarized can perhaps be answered in the little girl's detective work in "Women and their Ways": Fern's home was recognizable to the little girl because of the plentiful flowers, artwork, and open windows, all preferences that Fern wrote about in her columns. James Parton and Ethel Parton both cite Fern's particular style of home decorating as a key incentive to those who burgled the home, noting that her style "imparted an air of elegance and distinction to her abode" that was "deceptive[ly]" luxurious (*MV* 67). Fern's decorating taste, especially her fondness for flowers, fresh air, and simple, elegant furnishings was frequently mentioned in her columns and described at length in *Ruth Hall*.⁵¹ While her candid expostulations about her personal tastes and opinions about domestic spaces brought an adoring little reader to her front door—but not further—these same personal reflections also resulted in a severe incursion of her public and private boundaries in the form of repeated robberies.

In the column protesting these frequent invasions, Fern goes on to recount a near tragedy:

"What did they take?" I'll tell you what they *didn't* take, for which I get on my knees to them, whether they are in jail or out. The life of my little grandchild, who unsuspectingly ran upstairs alone, to get some little plaything, and tripped down, singing, to say "she couldn't get the closet door open." The wretch was in there. That taking other gold, he left the gold that was shining on *her* flossy head, is matter of praise enough for me (*MV* 68).

Though Fern maintains a lighthearted tone throughout the rest of the column, her speculation as to what could have happened to Ethel is fraught with intense emotion. This invasion of privacy

⁵¹ James Parton noted "she had a particular taste in decorating a house and knew how to make rooms look exceedingly attractive, and even luxurious, out of very ordinary and inexpensive articles. Usually she had a profusion of flowers in the windows, through which could be dimly seen a portion of a statuette, or some other object of art, which might not have cost half a dollar, and yet imparted an air of elegance and distinction to her abode" (*MV* 67).

marks a remarkable collision of Fern's public and private identities. Fern pleaded in the column that she had nothing worth stealing, and humorously argued that those in search of wealth would be better rewarded by burgling her publisher and close friend Robert Bonner: "Now if they want plunder why not go to headquarters—to Robert Bonner, for instance. I don't own a *Dexter*, nor a *Pocahontas*, nor a *Peerless*, though a *Lantern* is the last thing they'd want. I have neither cashmere shawls nor diamonds. All the silver I ever owned they relieved me of two years since" (*MV* 67). Fern's joke refers to Bonner's prized show horses, well-known "treasures" of his stables. As Ethel Parton observed:

Valuables of that particular kind [horses] are not easily stolen but the hint was not wasted. Although her own humorous plea of poverty did not avail—the house was robbed again—the suggestion of Mr. Bonner's wealth bore fruit. Within a week his house was entered and, although the marauders were disturbed and he and a son chased them vigorously through back lots and over fences, they escaped with most of his silver (*EP* 12).

Only days after her jesting remarks about burgling Bonner's home in lieu of her own, intruders stole most of his silver. This direct response to Fern's column is particularly striking. Parton's account of the burglaries concludes with a conversation between Fern and Bonner: "With wry amusement, and some little reproach, [Bonner] told Fanny Fern [about the robberies], who refused to be contrite. 'Shocking!' she agreed; 'it shows what kind of people read your paper!'" (*EP* 13). Fern displaces the shock of home invasion with the "shocking" recognition of the diverse and at times threatening mass audience who read Bonner's *New York Ledger*. The burglaries at Fern's and Bonner's homes illustrate the invasive nature of Fern's public image. The burglars who invaded Fern's private space recall Ethel Parton's description of the metaphorical "Peeping Tom's" who pressed their noses against Fern's windows in hopes of catching a glimpse of her personal life. While the criminals took this impulse several steps further than members of the press, aggressive fans, or the author of *The Life and Beauties of Fanny Fern*, the initial goal to exploit Fern's public image and invade her personal life is much the same.

The increased familiarity and accessibility of her printed works fueled her success while also making her increasingly vulnerable to assaults on her work, her personality, and ultimately her home and possessions.

Initially identifying her success due in part to her “stark nakedness” in public, Hawthorne expressed praise for Fern’s ability to relate intimately with her readers. In later correspondence, he again figuratively undressed Fanny Fern, identifying, “this spectacle of Fanny Fern in little more than her bare bones, her heart pulsating visibly and indecently in its cage of ribs. Still there are ribs and there is a heart. Here is not merely silk and suavity and surface.”⁵² Like Fern’s fictional Mary Andrews, Hawthorne discerns Fern’s “heart” in her writing. Hawthorne identifies Fern’s vulnerability in the figurative stripping of both her clothing and her skin. Reduced to a “pulsating heart,” Fern is juxtaposed to the “silk and suavity and surface” Hawthorne criticized in other contemporary writers; here was a woman writer capable of stripping away convention.⁵³ In his praise of “the spectacle of Fanny Fern” Hawthorne emphasizes Fern’s vulnerability in public, nearly stripped of a physical form with a visible, pulsing heart, she is reduced to a nearly disembodied spectacle. This vulnerability and intimacy with her readers highlights the central paradox of Fern’s career: her success depended on her ability to put herself, and her “heart,” in her writing. Yet this same practice opened Fern up to rampant speculation about her body, her private life, and even made her a target for criminals. Mary Kelley’s assertion that Fern’s career represents a quintessential drama of private life versus public celebrity rings true, especially in light of the series of burglaries. Yet what Kelley and

⁵² Quoted in Warren 122.

⁵³ For more on Hawthorne and Fern, see Alison M. Easton, “My Banker and I Can Afford to Laugh!: Class and Gender in Fanny Fern and Nathaniel Hawthorne,” *Soft Canons: American Women Writers and Masculine Tradition* ed. Karen L. Kilcup (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1999). Easton’s argument focuses on a comparison of Hawthorne and Fern in their negotiation of the increasing economic power of the middle class. Hawthorne’s appreciation of Fern (as “stark naked”) is a praise of her “capacity to strip off the polite covering of bourgeois existence” (220).

many other scholars fail to acknowledge is Fern's own complicity and perpetuation of this drama; Fern's jesting response to Bonner signals the way in which Fern understood her public. Rather than accept responsibility for drawing attention to Bonner's wealth, Fern instead draws attention to the suspect character of *Ledger* readers. Fern's formula for success relied on selectively sharing her life with readers; as her reply to Bonner indicates, the best she could do was manage the tide; once disseminated into her vast readership, Fern knew she had little control.

Perhaps Fern's most successful attempt to manage her public and private identities was at the end of her life.⁵⁴ In his *Memorial Volume*, Parton recounts Fern's long illness, detailing her desire to continue writing for the *Ledger* and her insistence that her illness be kept secret from all except her immediate family. According to Parton, during the six years Fern battled cancer, she continued to write her column, never missing a week, until the final month of her life. Parton recalls the family's efforts to urge Fern to discontinue writing: "[In the last year of her life] she lost the use of her right arm, and was obliged to write painfully and toilsomely with her left. Write she *would*. As often as we remonstrated, and begged her to refrain, she would reply: 'No! I must do it; for as long as people see my pieces in the *Ledger* every week, they cannot say that I am sick'" (MV 75). She succeeded in hiding her illness from the public; most of her readers only knew of her struggle with cancer when they opened the November 2, 1872 edition of the *New York Ledger*. With the editorial page, Fern's print home for nearly seventeen years, edged in black, Bonner announced Fern's death: "Her success was assured, because she had something

⁵⁴ Warren 272. Warren explains "although no sources mention the nature of the surgery or the type of the cancer, the symptoms are consistent with breast cancer, and one suspects that the surgery involved a mastectomy" (359). Warren refers to a surgery Fern most likely underwent in early 1872, after which she lost the use of her right arm.

to say, and knew how to say it...giving the world a piece of her mind.”⁵⁵ Kelley assesses the material gestures of grief associated with Fern’s death such as the Pullman car named after her, and the emotional grief felt by an American people bereft of a national voice. While Fern’s significance as a national icon cannot not be underestimated, her success and her fame were built upon an intimate foundation of emotional exchange with readers. This exchange came at a price; under pressure to stop writing when she fell ill, Fern’s response is suggestive: “as long as people see my pieces in the *Ledger* every week, they cannot say that I am sick.” Her reply again illustrates the way in which the public and private Fanny Fern “dissolved” into one another. By keeping her illness out of the realm of public comment, she did more than simply protect her privacy; her desperate desire to keep herself in print was a way to forestall the reality of her own illness and to remain, for her readers and perhaps herself, the Fanny Fern that all had come to expect.

⁵⁵ Quoted in Warren 286.

Chapter 5

‘Going Beyond the Book’: Responding to *Little Women*

How dreary to be a somebody!
How public like a frog
To tell your name the livelong day
To an admiring bog!
--Emily Dickinson¹

While traveling in Switzerland in the summer of 1870, Louisa May Alcott was stalked through the post by implacable magazine editors pestering her with requests for material. Following the publication of *Little Women: Part One* (1868), Alcott’s literary fortunes were transformed as requests for articles, poems, stories, and novels poured in from ambitious editors attempting to capitalize on her success.² She confided to longtime editor Thomas Niles: “I am duly grateful, but having come abroad for rest, I am not inclined to try the treadmill till my year’s vacation is over” (L 144). Alcott sent what she termed “a trifle in rhyme...to appease the worthy gentlemen” and asked that Niles distribute the poem on her behalf. In “The Lay of a Golden Goose” Alcott describes herself as an “ugly duckling” struggling to manage the instant

¹ Emily Dickinson, *The Poems of Emily Dickinson: Reading Edition* ed. R.W. Franklin (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 2003) 116.

² Alcott complained of this new burden of work in a letter to Alfred Whitman, 6 January 1869: “I have planned to write you dozens of times but work prevented, now I really *will*, though piles of Mss. lie waiting for my editorial eye...I am such a busy old bee I find no time for pleasure not even for writing letters, so every one is neglected and I am burdened with a perpetual sense of guilt. But publishers come roaring after me if I don’t do my work and money tempts my mercenary mind, so I scratch away hoping a time of rest will come in the course of ages.” See Joel Myerson and Daniel Shealy, eds., Madeleine Stern, Associate ed. *The Letters of Louisa May Alcott* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1987) 120. All subsequent references will be included parenthetically in the text, distinguished by L.

notoriety she had recently achieved with the publication of *Little Women*.³ The “trifle in rhyme” is noteworthy because it stridently reinforces the boundary that her self-imposed exile from Boston was intended to establish, characterizing her journey to Europe as a desperate attempt to escape the demands of “too many friends”:

So to escape too many friends,
Without uncivil strife,
She ran to the Atlantic pond
And paddled for her life.

Soon up among the grand old Alps
She found two blessed things,
The health she had so nearly lost,
And rest for weary limbs.

Alcott’s health, poor since treatment for typhoid fever exposed her to dangerous levels of mercury,⁴ gave out following the intense writing period that produced parts one and two of *Little Women*.⁵ Yet her growing discomfort with her celebrity was an even more pressing concern. Writing from Concord in the winter of 1869, only months after the first volume of *Little Women*

³ Alcott used the metaphor of the “goose who laid the golden eggs” to describe herself throughout her career. For example, in a 29 November 1872 letter to her father, Louisa referred to herself as “the golden goose” (L 173). The poem is a humorous telling of Alcott’s sudden ascent to fame and her own surprise that she was able to “lay golden eggs.” The poem describes how the “ugly duckling” (also a favorite metaphor of Alcott’s for herself) endured criticism and mocking at the hands of others who did not think she should be trying to do something different: “In vain parental cracklings,/In vain the cold sky’s frown,/Ambitious goosey tried to soar,/ but always tumbled down”; “The owls came out and flew about,/Hooting above the rest,/No useful egg was ever hatched/From transcendental nest.”

⁴ Alcott was treated with calomel, a drug containing high levels of mercury, when she contracted typhoid fever during her brief stint as a nurse during the Civil War. She suffered from the side effects of mercury poisoning for the rest of her life. In a 30 May 1870 letter to her family, Alcott describes a new program of treatment to improve her health, citing her doctor’s opinion that “my leg trouble and many of my other woes, come from the calomel they gave me in Washington” (L 137). Sarah Elbert describes Alcott as “a lingering casualty of the Civil War” and describes the symptoms Alcott suffered for the rest of her life: fatigue, weakness, loss of appetite, sore throats, tremors, and lameness. See Sarah Elbert, *A Hunger for Home: Louisa May Alcott’s Place in American Culture* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1987) 282.

⁵ After the publication of *Little Women* in October 1868, Alcott wrote furiously to complete the recently commissioned second volume. Writing one chapter per day in order to complete the second installment of *Little Women* in eight weeks, Alcott often worked for fourteen hours per day, writing in her journal on 17 November 1868: “Finished my thirteenth chapter. I am so full of my work, I can’t stop to eat or sleep, or for anything but a daily run.” Her breakneck writing pace and ensuing breakdown in health was one factor that inspired Alcott to retreat to Europe following publication of *Little Women: Part Two* in April 1869. See Ednah Cheney, *Louisa May Alcott: Her Life, Letters, and Journals* (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1890) 201.

was published, a disgruntled Alcott noted in her journal: “People begin to come and stare at the Alcotts. Reporters haunt the place to look at the authoress, who dodges into the woods *a la* Hawthorne, and won’t be even a very small lion.”⁶ Alcott had also begun receiving large numbers of reader letters that demanded “more stories; more right away!” and criticized her management of the relationship between Jo March and Teddy Laurence in *Little Women*.⁷ However, as the concluding stanzas of the poem describe, her newfound literary celebrity was difficult to shake:

But still across the briny deep
Couched in most friendly words,
Came prayers for letters, tales, or verse,
From literary birds.

Whereat the renovated fowl
With grateful thanks profuse,
Took from her wing a quill and wrote
This lay of a Golden Goose.⁸

Although Alcott’s “renovated fowl” obliges the literary birds, her instructions to Niles “to set [the poem] going as a general answer to everybody” again reinforce her decision to avoid “the treadmill” of celebrity for as long as possible (*L* 144). The success of her “girls book” forced Alcott to come to terms with the demands of literary celebrity. Although she immediately bristled against the confines of celebrity, *Little Women* transformed Alcott, the self-described

⁶ Quoted in Cheney 208.

⁷ The call for “More stories!” is fictionally depicted in *Jo’s Boys*; see Louisa May Alcott, *Little Women, Little Men, Jo’s Boys* ed. Elaine Showalter (New York: Library of America, 2005) 836. Subsequent references will be included parenthetically in the text, designated as *LW*, *LM*, or *JB*. Alcott also describes the pleas for more stories and novels in “The Lay of a Golden Goose”: “But best of all the little fowls/Still playing on the shore,/Soft downy chicks and goslings gay,/Chirped out, ‘Dear Goose, lay more.’ But goosey all these weary years/Had toiled like any ant,/And wearied out she now replied,/ ‘My little dears, I can’t.’”

⁸ Quoted in Cheney 207.

“ugly duckling,” into something far more valuable than a swan: the goose who could lay golden eggs.⁹

Sixteen years later, near the end of her life, Alcott again criticized the trials of celebrity and used her beloved fictional character, Jo March, to illustrate the absurdity of many readers’ “well-meant but very wearisome attentions” (*JB* 837). In “Jo’s Last Scrape,” a chapter in *Jo’s Boys* (1886), Alcott describes the lively and indefatigable Jo March as an author at the mercy of her unanticipated celebrity, a woman whose “admiring public” had disconcertingly “[taken] possession of her and all her affairs, past, present, and to come” (*JB* 837). Alcott’s resentment over her own “loss of liberty” and her weariness after twenty years in the glare of the celebrity spotlight clearly drive her derisive portrait of the trespassing fans, neighborhood schoolchildren, and prying reporters who descend upon Jo’s private home. Indeed, Alcott’s authorial voice disrupts the narrative to emphasize that the interruptions and inconveniences that Jo endures are “true tale[s]” and cautions readers to take note of Jo’s exasperated reaction. In correspondence with Niles, Alcott indicates that she used Jo as a mouthpiece to vent her frustrations with readers in the chapter. She explained to Niles that the incidents recorded in “Jo’s Last Scrape” were intended to heap “a little good natured [sic] ridicule” upon readers so that they would no longer “harass the authors whom they

⁹ Alcott’s nearly fourteen-year professional literary career that preceded the publication of *Little Women* was, in many respects, quite successful. She was one of the few female contributors featured in the new beacon of high culture, the *Atlantic Monthly*, her regular stories published in *Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper* and *The Flag of Our Union* were readily accepted and provided a regular income, and her essay collection, *Hospital Sketches* (1863) and first novel, *Moods* (1864), received critical, if not popular, acclaim. Indeed, in the winter of 1868, five months before she began writing *Little Women*, Alcott reflected in a letter to her mother, “I often think, as I go looking round, independent, with more work than I can do, and half a dozen publishers asking for tales, of the old times when I went meekly from door to door peddling my first poor little stories, and feeling *so* rich with \$10” (*L* 113). Adding to her newfound sense of satisfaction was her decision to accept Horace Fuller’s offer to edit the juvenile monthly *Merry’s Museum* for \$500 per year, her first foray into juvenile writing since her book of fairy tales, *Flower Fables*, was published in 1854. Regarding Alcott’s change in genre, Madeleine Stern argues, “such reputation as she could honestly claim [in 1868] was based upon *Hospital Sketches*, not her juvenilia.” See Stern, “The First Appearance of a *Little Women* Incident,” *Louisa May Alcott: From Blood and Thunder to Hearth and Home* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1998) 127.

honor with their regard” (L 300).¹⁰ Her desire to punish autograph seekers and other unmanageable readers results in an uneasy marriage of discipline and humor in the chapter, just as her desire for “good natured ridicule” expresses her frustration while working to contain it.

Alcott’s response to the demands of celebrity in “The Lay of the Golden Goose” and “Jo’s Last Scrape” indicate that she was, and remained, overwhelmed by the volume and intensity of readers’ responses to her work. Yet although Alcott was often quite candid in voicing her frustration with her readers, many literary critics have misinterpreted or failed to contextualize her remarks. Martha Saxton articulates the most popular misreading of Alcott’s comments about her readers by framing the author’s frustration within a larger foreclosure of literary possibilities in the wake of the novel’s success: “Her audience wanted more little women, and Louisa, rather than expose herself to possible displeasure, gave them what they asked for. Her writing...became another extension of her entrapment.”¹¹ Saxton, along with critics such as Richard Brodhead and Judith Fetterley, argue that Alcott’s frustration with her readers is the direct result of her own frustrated ambition. Yet by vilifying the popular audience

¹⁰ Her 3 October 1886 letter to Thomas Niles states that “the first gun fired seems to object to ‘Jo’s Last Scrape’” and refers to her initial concern about whether to include the chapter in *Jo’s Boys*. Several reviews of *Jo’s Boys* refer to the incidents described in “Jo’s Last Scrape” and conclude that “the chapter on the annoyances to which authors are subjected is evidently a portrayal of Miss Alcott’s own experience” (*The Providence Sunday Journal* 2.16 31 October 1886). Beverly Lyon Clark, ed. *Louisa May Alcott: The Contemporary Reviews* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004) 365. Although most reviewers found “Jo’s Last Scrape” amusing, the *Boston Daily Advertiser* (2 October 1886) dedicated nearly half of its lengthy review to criticizing the chapter, labeling it “gossip” (Clark 360-361).

¹¹ Martha Saxton, *Louisa May: A Modern Biography of Louisa May Alcott* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1977). See also Richard Brodhead, *Cultures of Letters: Scenes of Reading and Writing in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chicago: The University of Chicago, 1993). In his study of how Alcott “chose to situate herself in a historical field of writerly possibilities” (86), Brodhead argues that one of her choices was to “shut down a level of ambition that had left her painfully exposed” (85-89). Judith Fetterley also depicts Alcott’s career (post-*Little Women*) as a capitulation to social pressures. See Judith Fetterley, “Alcott’s Civil War,” *Feminist Studies* 5.2 (Summer 1979): 369-383. Shirley Foster, Judy Simon and Madeleine Stern all also argue that Alcott was confined by the success of *Little Women*. See Shirley Foster and Judy Simons, eds. *What Katy Read: Feminist Re-Readings of ‘Classic’ Stories for Girls* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1995); Madeleine Stern, *Louisa May Alcott: From Blood and Thunder to Hearth and Home*.

that made her famous as agents of “entrapment” and withdrawing Alcott’s own agency in her career choices, many critics have overlooked the ways in which Alcott’s negative response to both her celebrity and her intrusive readers was, in fact, fueled by her own conflation of author and fictional character.

This chapter argues that Alcott’s frustrations with literary celebrity and vexed relationship with her readers were due, in large part, to her development of the “*Little Women* style” which blurred the boundary between Alcott’s biography and her fictional texts. In response to the dominant trajectory of Alcott criticism that characterizes the author as victimized by her own success, I argue that the development and publicity of the “*Little Women* style” profoundly shaped the terms of Alcott’s reception by encouraging readers to equate the author with her most popular heroine, Jo March. This practice had larger consequences for the novel’s reception, as readers sought to, in the words of one contemporary reviewer, “go beyond the book,” by incorporating the fictional text in their own lives. By writing alternative endings to *Little Women*, seeking “real life” counterparts to Alcott’s fictional characters, and claiming to be Jo March, readers attempted to integrate her fictional characters, setting, and plot with their own experiences. I close by arguing that Alcott used both the content of *A Modern Mephistopheles* (1877) and its anonymous publication in the Roberts Brothers No Name Series to refute the cultural assumptions upon which the series was based: in short, the ability to “know” an author by reading words on a page. In *A Modern Mephistopheles*, a dark portrayal of an author’s deception and manipulation of the reading public, Alcott rejects this notion while also rejecting readers’ attempts to claim a relationship with her that was rooted in readers’ identification with the fictional Jo March.

“Oh aint Lu cross?”: The Trials of Celebrity

In a satirical sketch for the *Springfield Republican* published three weeks after *Little Women: Part Two* was released, Alcott, under the thin disguise of her *Hospital Sketches* narrator, Tribulation Periwinkle, took aim at the reporters who invaded Concord, “the hot-bed of genius”:

[E]ach spring brings, with the robins, a flock of reporters, who like the brisk and inquisitive birds, roost upon Concordian fences, chirp on Concordian doorsteps, and hop over Concordian hills and fields, scratching vigorously, as if hoping to unearth a new specimen from what is popularly believed to be the hot-bed of genius. If these early birds get no worms, it is not their fault, as the inhabitants of this much-enduring village will testify; the feminine portion, especially, for to them the words “private life,” “sanctity of home,” “domestic seclusion,” are a hollow mockery during six months of the year.¹²

Alcott sharply reproves the “flock of reporters,” focusing especially on their tendency to invade the “private life” and “domestic seclusion” of the Alcott family. Her ire is all the more startling when we remember that she is writing less than seven months after the publication of part one of *Little Women*. Her choice to publish in the *Springfield Republican* is also noteworthy. Alcott described Franklin Sanborn, editor of the paper, Concord native, and Alcott family friend as “an old tattle tale” and accused him of publishing inaccurate “gossip” about her career.¹³ Publishing her negative response to prying reporters in a regional newspaper that regularly featured literary gossip was likely an attempt to dissuade other curious readers from visiting the Alcott family home in Concord.

¹² Printed in the *Springfield Republican*, 5 May 1869. While she does not mention her own name, Alcott paints a clear picture of her desired response to reporters when she describes, “one irascible spinster, driven to frenzy by twenty-eight visitors in a week, [who] proposed to get a garden engine and ‘play away’ whenever a suspicious stranger was seen entering her gates” (L 128).

¹³ Sanborn wrote a regular column of literary gossip, entitled “From Boston” (L 184). For example, in a letter to Edwin Bacon, editor of the *Boston Globe*, Alcott denies claims made about her in the *Springfield Republican*, stating, “The *Springfield Republican* is a great gossip, and as one of the editors lives in Concord [Sanborn] it is vain to try and keep anything private,” (L 183-84). In an 8 July 1870 letter to her family, Alcott expresses her frustration against “Bun,” the family’s name for Sanborn, for likely including information in his regular gossip column, stating, “I should like to knock [his] head off for meddling with what don’t concern [him] old tattle tail!” (L 148).

While staking her claim for privacy in this public statement, Alcott also vocalized her frustration with the overzealous fans that invaded her domestic space in her personal letters.¹⁴

Alcott firmly rejected one neighbor's plea to bring visitors to the Alcott home:

I don't believe any one knows how we are bored by company, over a hundred a month, most of them strangers. A whole school came without warning last week and Concord people bring all their company to see us. This may *seem* pleasant, but when kept up a whole season is a great affliction. Mother says we have no home now and no chance to see our own friends...I have resolved to defend Marmee's health and home at point of the bayonet, and be called a cross patch for my pains. It is only fair that I take the scoldings since I have been, quite innocently, the cause of much of this discomfort (L 193).

Alcott's awareness that she has been the "cause of much discomfort," especially on the part of her beloved Marmee, sharpens her reply concerning the "great affliction" posed by uninvited guests. Her shrewd assumption that she would be "called a cross patch" for her efforts to defend the Alcott family home from the leagues of curious and appreciative visitors was quite astute.¹⁵ In part, this assumption of intimacy with Alcott and her family was fueled by the popular notion that Jo March and Louisa May Alcott were one and the same. By reading the history of the March family, readers often believed they had become intimately acquainted with the Alcotts and sought the opportunity to see the "real" Jo, Marmee, or Amy in their home environment. Visitors' expectation for admittance was also predicated on gendered expectations. Although "Latest News from Concord" derives much of its humor from her satire of the transcendental luminaries who lived in Concord, she is careful to note that the surge

¹⁴ Alcott's journal for July 1875 records "ninety-two guests in one month to entertain. Fame is an expensive luxury. I can do without it" (196). Joel Myerson and Daniel Shealy, eds., Madeleine Stern, Associate ed. *The Journals of Louisa May Alcott* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1989). Subsequent references will be included parenthetically, distinguished by *J*.

¹⁵ Lydia Maria Child noted in a letter: "some people complain that [Louisa and her sister, May Alcott] are brusque; but it is merely because they are very straightforward and sincere. They have a Christian hatred of lionizing; and the Leo hunters are a very numerous and impertinent family." See Daniel Shealy, ed. *Alcott in Her Own Time* (Iowa City, University of Iowa Press, 2005) 22. It is significant that Alcott was considered "brusque" for turning away the hordes of strangers who traveled to Concord in order to visit the Alcott home, as is the assumption, on the part of most visitors, that they would or should be welcomed into Alcott's private home.

of visitors was particularly distressing “for the feminine portion.”¹⁶ Alcott, “resolved to defend Marmee’s health and home at point of the bayonet,” was denied this robust defense of her domestic space, instead astutely noting in her humorous article that any drastic action on the part of a woman was “not accepted...hospitality being one of the ruling passions of the Marthas who are in danger of sinking under the accumulated horrors of spring cleaning and spring visitors.” Hospitality, the “ruling passion,” dictated that Alcott receive many of the guests who descended upon her in Concord, unlike her former neighbor, Nathaniel Hawthorne, who promptly retreated to the woods when faced with a visitor.¹⁷

Denied the bayonet to guard against unknown visitors, Alcott proposes a solution in her vehement postscript to Mrs. Woods: “I wish you’d write an article on the rights of authors, and try to make the public see that the books belong to them but not the peace, time, comfort and lives of the writers. It is a new kind of slavery and these horrid Paul Pry’s *must* be put down” (*L* 193). Her clarification that it is the *books* not the *writers* who “belong to...the public” recalls her description of the “admiring public’s...possession” of Jo March in “Jo’s Last Scrape.” Similarly, her need to separate herself from her text echoes Fanny Fern’s need to separate the identities of “the woman” from “the author.” Both authors, while concerned with demarcating which parts of themselves should be shared with the public, also chose to write about aspects of their personal lives in their public work. Yet Alcott’s uneasiness about the public’s access to her physical person and space, not only her published work, is again confounded by the conflation of her individual identity with that of her fictional heroine. It was Alcott who initially violated

¹⁶ For example, she writes, “Guides will be in attendance to show the most famous portions of the glorified sand-bank, and a daily bulletin will appear telling the most favorable hours for beholding the various lions—something in this style, perhaps—Emerson will walk at 4 p.m./[Bronson] Alcott will converse from 8 a.m. till 11 p.m./Channing may be seen with the naked eye at sunset/The new Hermit will grind his meal at noon, precisely/The ladies of Concord will not be exhibited on Saturdays.”

¹⁷ Alcott refers to Hawthorne’s retreat from visitors several times in her letters and journals, clearly preferring his method to what she perceived was her duty, receiving strangers.

her ideal separation of the *book* and the *writer*; not only because she drew upon her own life when writing *Little Women*, but because she and her publishers actively publicized the biographical links between Alcott and her fiction throughout her career.¹⁸

While less immediately invasive than the intrusive strangers in her home, Alcott swiftly came to resent the flood of letters from readers she began receiving following the publication of *Little Women*. When away from Concord, her letters frequently refer to her readers and their demands upon her time; for example, while in Europe immediately following the publication of *Little Women*, Alcott wrote to her mother and to Niles requesting that they not forward any more fan letters from what she terms “cracked girls” because the “rampant infants” must wait for her next work.¹⁹ In another letter to longtime friend Alfred Newman, Alcott initially refers to the fans of *Little Women* as the “little dears” only to cross this description out and replace it with “young gossips.” Although Alcott did participate in extensive correspondence with certain readers, her typical reaction to fan letters was a mixture of gratitude and frustration; she recognized the importance of such loyal fans but resented the intrusive nature of their questions and suggestions.²⁰

¹⁸ Roberts Brothers were particularly adept at stimulating market interest in new volumes of *Little Women*. Their 1880 volume, for example, was the first to include both parts one and two in the same volume, and also featured the first image of Alcott to accompany her work, as well as an image of Alcott’s Concord home, Orchard House. For more on visual representations of *Little Women*, see Susan R. Gannon, “Getting Cozy with a Classic: Visualizing *Little Women* 1868-1995,” *Little Women and the Feminist Imagination*, eds., Janice M. Alberghene and Beverly Lyon Clark (New York: Garland, 1999).

¹⁹ In her 23 August 1870 letter to Niles, Alcott wrote: “Don’t give my address to any one. I don’t want the young ladies’ notes. They can send them to Concord and I shall get them next year.” Quoted in Cheney 248. See also LMA to Abba May Alcott (L 148) and LMA to Alfred Whitman (L 120).

²⁰ For example, Alcott corresponded with the Lukens sisters who started their own family journal after being inspired by the March sisters in *Little Women*. Alcott subscribed to their paper and offered advice and contributions, (L 168, 176, 177). According to Shealy, Myerson, and Stern, the Lukens sisters and their magazine were quite exceptional. The five sisters (the oldest was seventeen) “convinced their father to print their own journal, *Little Things*, after the example of the March sisters in *Little Women*. Started in March 1871 as a handwritten newspaper, it was typeset by the third monthly issue. In August 1873, the title was changed to *Young Folks’ Journal*, and the format enlarged. By May of next year there were more than a thousand subscribers, and the girls gave it up, selling their subscription list to another publisher” (L 169 n1).

Her anxiety about privacy and the post was heightened when she learned from Niles that her personal correspondence had been published or excerpted in newspapers like Sanborn's *Springfield Republican*. She described the offending "notices" in a July 1870 letter to the Alcott family:

...a notice in the gossipy old Republican telling about my 'good old English Dr. and my legs, and my grief for Dickens (don't care a pin) and all my plans and ails and c.'...another notice said I wrote diaries at 6, plays at 10, went out to service at 13, and was governess and dragged a baby around the Common. I recognize Pa's nice derangement of dates here, and fancy it was written by some of his admirers. I suppose I ought to like it but I don't. (Oh aint Lu cross?)²¹

Alcott's admission that "I ought to like it but I don't" is telling. Her newfound popularity forced Alcott to begin managing her unwieldy public image by policing public statements about her life and crafting a unified, "correct" version of her biography, a task that was further complicated when her autobiography became inseparable from the fictional life of Jo March in the minds of many readers. Much of Alcott's anxiety is rooted in the unnerving news that her private correspondence had been leaked to newspapers and gossip columns; yet there is also an underlying concern with providing the authorized version of her life for the public, as evidenced by her jab about Bronson Alcott's habit of misremembering dates.²² Her concern with controlling her private correspondence continued throughout her career, as she wrote in a letter to her mother, "Give my love to everyone who wants it, and don't read my letters to everybody for I hate to write if Tom, Dick, and Harry are to see 'em" (L 142).²³ While it was common for

²¹ Alcott had received help from Dr. King ("the English doctor") to help cure her neuralgia and other side effects from her mercury poisoning in the Civil War. Myerson, Shealy, and Stern explain that Alcott's comment about Dickens was a response to a report circulating about her intense grief at his recent death. Her insinuation that one of Alcott's friends wrote the report would likely refer to Franklin Sanborn (L 148).

²² In a letter dated 8 December 1872, Alcott wrote her father: "I am 40 *not* 41, sir. It is a wise man that knows the age of his own child" (L 175).

²³ Cornelia Meigs claims that Alcott, "weary of being pursued by publicity, destroyed all the letters her mother had so carefully preserved" from Alcott's time in Europe. However, according to Meigs, Bronson Alcott copied many

the Alcott family to circulate letters amongst themselves and their extended family, as indeed it was for many nineteenth-century families, Louisa May Alcott included a “Private” section in many of the letters she sent to the Alcott family. Indeed, her request that her letters not be read to “everybody” lest “Tom, Dick, and Harry...see ‘em” was included in a section marked “private,” presumably so that her admonition would not be read by strangers.²⁴ Alcott’s concern over who had access to her correspondence mirrors her anxiety about strangers who expected admittance to Orchard House; in both cases, she attempted to establish a boundary separating her private life from the unknown public audience. By refusing entrance to her home or censoring her correspondence she attempted to police this fluid boundary. This proved impossible, however, because Alcott could not control a reading public that continued to intimately associate the Alcott with Jo March, and therefore, to blur the boundary between fiction and reality that had begun, rather ironically, with the publication of *Little Women*.

“Characters Drawn from life”

An advertisement for *Little Women* (1868) included in the novel’s sequel, *Little Men* (1871), prominently features a fan letter from a young reader named Nelly who responds eagerly to both Alcott and her famous and beloved heroine, Jo March (see Figure 6.1). The advertisement copy asserts that the letter is a “verbatim copy of a letter from a ‘little woman’...to the author of ‘Little Women.’” “Dear Jo, or Miss Alcott,” writes Nelly, “we have all been reading ‘Little Women’...[w]e think *you* are perfectly splendid; I like you better every

of these letters, many of which are now in the Alcott archives at the Houghton Library. See Cornelia Meigs, *Louisa May Alcott and the American Family Story* (London: Bodley Head, 1970) 73.

²⁴ Alcott’s postscripts often include financial information, detailing her salary and giving specific instructions for how the money should be used (which debts to pay, which provisions to be bought for Abba May, etc.). “Private” sections also inquire about the family’s health and report on her own health, especially when she is abroad. For more on the circulation of private letters, see David M. Henkin, *The Postal Age: The Emergence of Modern Communications in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2006) 103-107.

time I read it. We were all so disappointed about your not marrying Laurie. I cried over that part—I could not help it.” Nelly’s initial address (“Dear Jo, or Miss Alcott”), her assertion that she “like[s] [Alcott] better every time” she reads the novel, and her disappointment that Alcott did not marry Laurie are exemplary of the straightforward substitution of Jo for Alcott practiced by many readers. Nelly expresses an unshaken confidence in Alcott that is generated by Nelly’s intimate relationship with Jo March, an intimacy created and fostered by reading *Little Women*. Confirming the interchangeability of Alcott and Jo was a central component of the Roberts Brothers publicity plan. For nearly twenty years Thomas Niles and his firm exploited the Alcott-Jo connection in advertisements and other promotions, an important, but often overlooked, aspect of the enduring myths surrounding Alcott and her famous character.

Readers’ assumption that *Little Women* was a factual restatement of Louisa May Alcott’s life prompted provocative responses to her famous novel. Sanctioned by and imposed upon Alcott by publishers, readers, and reviewers, this conflation encouraged intensely personal responses from readers: some claimed a personal relationship with Alcott as a result of their familiarity with Jo while others assumed the fictional identity of Jo March as their own. Alcott’s need to negotiate these intrusive reader responses was predicated upon her formulation of what she described as the “*Little Women* style,” a writing style that owed its success to, in Alcott’s words, “characters [that were] drawn from life,” as well as the contemporary marketing effort that characterized the novel as autobiographical (L 118). Alcott’s development of the “*Little Women* style” was influential in setting the terms of her reception because it established a precedent of linking Alcott’s fiction with her real life, thereby muddying the interpretive waters for generations of readers who sought the fictional Jo in the real Alcott, and vice versa. By colluding in the conflation of Alcott and Jo, she unleashed the possibility for invasive reader responses that drew no distinction between Jo March and Louisa May Alcott, between the

"MAKE THEIR ACQUAINTANCE; FOR AMY WILL BE FOUND DELIGHTFUL, BETH VERY LOVELY, MEG BEAUTIFUL, AND JO SPLENDID!" — *The Catholic World*.

LITTLE WOMEN. By LOUISA M. ALCOTT.
In Two Parts. Price of each \$1.50.

"Simply one of the most charming little books that have fallen into our hands for many a day. There is just enough of sadness in it to make it true to life, while it is so full of honest work and whole-souled fun, paints so lively a picture of a home in which contentment, energy, high spirits, and real goodness make up for the lack of money, that it will do good wherever it finds its way. Few will read it without lasting profit." — *Hartford Courant*.

"LITTLE WOMEN. By Louisa M. Alcott. We regard these volumes as two of the most fascinating that ever came into a household. Old and young read them with the same eagerness. Lifelike in all their delineations of time, place, and character, they are not only intensely interesting, but full of a cheerful morality, that makes them healthy reading for both fireside and the Sunday school. We think we love "Jo" a little better than all the rest, her genius is so happy tempered with affection." — *The Guiding Star*.

The following verbatim copy of a letter from a "little woman" is a specimen of many which enthusiasm for her book has dictated to the author of "Little Women:" —

— March 12, 1870.

DEAR JO, OR MISS ALCOTT, — We have all been reading "Little Women," and we liked it so much I could not help wanting to write to you. We think *you* are perfectly splendid; I like you better every time I read it. We were all so disappointed about your not marrying Laurie; I cried over that part, — I could not help it. We all liked Laurie ever so much, and almost killed ourselves laughing over the funny things you and he said.

We are six sisters and two brothers; and there were so many things in "Little Women" that seemed so natural, especially selling the rags.

Eddie is the oldest; then there is Annie (our Meg), then Nelly (that's me), May and Milly (our Beths), Rosie, Rollie, and dear little Carrie (the baby). Eddie goes away to school, and when he comes home for the holidays we have lots of fun, playing cricket, croquet, base ball, and every thing. If you ever want to play any of those games, just come to our house, and you will find plenty children to play with you.

If you ever come to —, I do wish you would come and see us, — we would like it so much.

I have named my doll after you, and I hope she will try and deserve it.

I do wish you would send me a picture of you. I hope your health is better, and you are having a nice time.

If you write to me, please direct — Ill. All the children send their love.

With ever so much love, from your affectionate friend,

NELLY.

Mailed to any address, postpaid, on receipt of the advertised price.

ROBERTS BROTHERS, PUBLISHERS,
Boston.

Fig. 6.1: Advertisement for *Little Women* featured in *Little Men*. Courtesy of the Juvenile Historical Collection, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

fictional March home and Orchard House, and between Jo's fictional psychological interior and that of Alcott herself.

Alcott acknowledges her readers' preference for the "*Little Women* style" in an August 1879 letter to Mary Mapes Dodge, then editor of *St. Nicholas*, acknowledging the tendency of "the little dears" to "cling" to her popular style (L 234). Although this letter is frequently cited as evidence of the limitations imposed on her work by her fans, Alcott's articulation of what constituted the "*Little Women* style" is often overlooked. Critics mistakenly assume that her characterization of the "*Little Women* style" is synonymous with juvenile fiction. However, Alcott frequently attributed the success of *Little Women* to the fact that it was "drawn from life" and therefore resonated with readers who responded to the "true and touching" facts of "every day life" found in her fiction. She repeatedly roots the success of the genre in its "truth to life" that appealed to readers of all ages.²⁵ Alcott described the distinctiveness of the "*Little Women* style" in its potential for realistic characters, events, and settings, rather than in the age of her reading audience.

While her work for juvenile magazines such as *St. Nicholas* was read primarily by children and adolescents, her novels and story collections were popular among adult readers. Reviewers consistently represented her audiences as intergenerational; a reviewer for *The Nation* observed that *Little Women* was "pleasurable for both young and old readers" and a *Boston Post* review described her mixed audience: "[Alcott] has taken eminent possession of that domain in fiction

²⁵ In a letter to Mary E. Channing Higginson Alcott attributes the success of *Little Women* to its correlation with "real life": "The characters were drawn from life, which gives them whatever merit they possess, for I find it impossible to invent anything half so true or touching as the simple facts with which every day life supplies me" (L 118). Alcott recorded a similar sentiment in her journal on 30 October 1868: "Pleasant notices and letters arrive, and much interest in my little women, who seem to find friends by their truth to life, as I hoped" (J 167).

on the border line of what pleases the young and what engages the mature.”²⁶ Equating Alcott’s “*Little Women* style” exclusively with children’s literature ignores the emphasis Alcott placed on realistic events and characters in her fiction, as well as her intergenerational reading audience. To do so also overlooks Alcott’s complicity in linking her own experiences and personality with that of her popular character, Jo March. By emphasizing the biographical connections between her life and that of her heroine, Alcott and her publishers encouraged her readers to see the two as interchangeable. As a result, many readers, both children and adults, turned to her *fiction* for a glimpse of what they believed to be *reality*; in this case, the comforting portrayal of an idyllic New England family. Confirmed in the success of this hybridized genre, Alcott attempted to claim the twin benefits of her “*Little Women* style.” Her work offered tempting glimpses into the author’s life and experiences while affording Alcott a fictional veil behind which she could retreat when necessary, as she does when elaborating *Jo*’s frustrating experiences with celebrity in “Jo’s Last Scrape,” rather than her own.²⁷ The “*Little Women* style” is significant in that it perpetuated the appearance of truth in her fictional works, which, as Alcott recognized, appealed to her readers.

Alcott’s “*Little Women* style” and the resulting conflation of author and character were not simply imposed on Alcott by market forces at the expense of her literary talent; she also encouraged this practice in her correspondence with friends, family, and readers. Not only did Alcott trade upon her private life in her fiction, her correspondence shows that Alcott promoted her own interchangeability with Jo March. In a reply to one young woman who questioned her

²⁶ *Boston Post* review in Clark, *Contemporary Reviews* 72; *Nation* review in Stern, *Critical Essays on Louisa May Alcott* (Boston: G.K. Hall and Company, 1984). Another reviewer describes Alcott’s audience to include “little people...and children of a larger growth [adults]” (*Contemporary Reviews* 81).

²⁷ In a letter to Mrs. Graham, Alcott humorously articulates her strategy for writing realistic fiction: “If Miss Alice has any good experiences, funny adventures, or interesting incidents in girl-life I shall be very glad to hear of them, and shall calmly put em [sic] in and then take all the credit for ‘those life-like pictures and touching episodes.’ That’s the way books are made, for there is nothing original in the world and the young folks write their own stories; we only steal and publish them” (L 220-221).

about the “real Laurie,” Alcott noted, “none of the characters in my books are drawn from life but the Marches” (*L* 167). Taking this assertion several steps further, Alcott later wrote to a friend with an update on family life:

The Marches send their regards and are all robust except Marmee who is much broken and is now the cherished ‘old baby’ as she calls herself. Amy is painting away in London and coming home to keep house in March. Meg and the lads are with us here in Boston for the winter. Mr. M. lectures and takes care of his large parish of young men and women. Jo is nurse, housekeeper, scribbler, and Papa to the boys (*L* 220).

Here, Alcott clearly identifies her mother (Marmee), father (Mr. M.), Abby May (Amy), Anna (Meg), and herself (Jo), with their March counterparts, causing the fictional March family to come alive in the day-to-day happenings of the Alcott family. In a letter to her Dutch translator, Mrs. Koorders-Boeke, she volunteered “a few little things [about herself]”:

Two sisters still live with me, May (“Amy”) a skillful artist, and Anna (“Meg”) now a widow with two children, “Daisy and Demi”; and I am the second daughter, and old spinster of 42 years. “Beth” the fourth daughter died a few years past, as in the book. Many things in my story truly happened, and much of *Little Women* is a reflection of this life led by us four sisters. I am “Jo” in the principal characteristics, not the good ones (*L* 193).²⁸

As in the previous letter, Alcott is careful to assign each family member with a corresponding fictional identity. In this example, she also refers to Beth March (Elizabeth Alcott) and directs the reader to the novel for more information about her death. In her claim to be “Jo in the principal characteristics,” Alcott appears quite comfortable conflating herself with her fictional character. However, it is difficult to determine her motives for doing so; for while her correspondence shows that she often clothed herself with the identity of Jo March, she may also have realized the benefit of maintaining the connection for the benefit of eager readers.

While Alcott confirmed the correlation between herself and her heroine in letters, reviewers made the biographical links between author and character explicit in their reviews,

²⁸ The recipient of this letter commented on Alcott’s claim to not “have the good [characteristics] of Jo in the body of the letter: “It is, naturally, her humility that makes her speak so, for Jo is Jo and no one else” (*L* 193).

thereby raising the expectations of readers who wanted to learn more about their beloved “Jo.” Several reviews characterized *Little Women* as an autobiography. Reviewers for *The Nation* and the *Springfield Daily Republican* directly compare Alcott’s “literary experiences” with those of Jo March.²⁹ Emphasizing the correlation between the real Alcott family and the fictional March family, reviewers for *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine* and *The Commonwealth* refer to the novel as “truthful as a photograph” and credit Alcott’s “genius for portraiture,” claiming “we almost note the expression of the face upon the printed page.”³⁰ Reviews underscoring the “photographic” nature of her work describe the realistic quality that Alcott herself valued as the key to her success with the “*Little Women* style.”

While reviews encouraged readers to equate Alcott with Jo March, her editor and chief publicist, Thomas Niles, was adept at marketing both Alcott and her books.³¹ Yet it is important to note that while Niles was a skilled promoter, the most significant promotional aspect of *Little Women* was the product of hesitation rather than strategy. Anxious about the novel’s prospects, Niles developed a cautious plan in the summer of 1868 to test the market with part one of *Little Women* before committing to the next volume.³² The two-part publication of the novel greatly

²⁹ Clark 74, 71.

³⁰ Clark 61, 70-71. *Harper’s* review quoted in Stern, *Critical Essays* 83; *Commonwealth* review quoted in Stern, *Critical Essays* 82.

³¹ The twenty-year professional relationship between Alcott and her publisher has received little critical attention. Roberts Brothers maintained a profitable, long-term relationship with Alcott; following the success of *Little Women*, the firm published all of her original novels and short story collections, as well as new editions of *Hospital Sketches* and *Moods*. For more on the working relationship between Niles and Alcott, see Raymond L. Kilgour, *Messrs. Roberts Brothers Publishers* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1952) 2-15, 48-102.

³² Niles’ initial concern was likely rooted in professional anxiety over Alcott’s success in a relatively new genre. Contemporary critics noted Alcott’s change in genre in their review of *Little Women*, for example the *Boston Daily Advertiser* heralded “Miss Alcott’s success in the branch of literature in which she has recently entered.” His concern also mirrors the editorial strategies of James Russell Lowell and James T. Fields, both of whom encouraged and profited from Alcott’s work while also deflating her hopes of a literary career. Consider, for example, James Russell Lowell’s acceptance of Alcott’s first story in the *Atlantic Monthly*, “Love and Self Love,” and his incredulity that it was an original story, not a “translation of a German tale” (J 95). In 1862, James Fields advised Alcott to “give up trying to write and stick to [her] teaching,” even offering forty dollars to “fit up” a kindergarten for twelve pupils (L 160, Cheney 130). After a brief stint as kindergarten teacher, Alcott’s

stimulated sales; readers were eager to learn about the March sisters' coming-of-age in the second volume.³³ Within four weeks of the publication of Part One, Niles' worries were assuaged by strong sales; he commissioned the second "act" of *Little Women* and developed an ambitious marketing strategy for both the novel and its author.³⁴ In the months between the publication of volume one on October 1, 1868, and volume two on April 14, 1869, interest was so intense on the part of readers that contemporary reviewers described the curiosity to know the dénouement of *Little Women* in terms of "an epidemic" and claimed the arrival of second volume was "anticipated with the eagerness of a bulletin from the war."³⁵ Critics nearly universally agreed with the *Boston Post* reviewer who proclaimed that "[*Little Women: Part Two*] has

sister May took her place in order to allow Alcott to return to writing: "I went back to my writing which pays much better, though Mr. F[ields] did say, 'Stick to your teaching; you can't write.' Being willful, I said, 'I won't teach; and I can write, and I'll prove it'" (Cheney 131). Anne Boyd chronicles Alcott's relationship with the *Atlantic*, and especially with James Fields, arguing that under his editorship the *Atlantic* experienced a significant decrease in woman contributors as he attempted to differentiate between high and low fiction. Boyd also delineates Alcott's changing attitude toward the *Atlantic*, and a series of disappointments and editorial critiques that led Alcott to write to a Alfred Whitman, "it don't [sic] take much brains to satisfy the *Atlantic* critics. They like that flat sort of tale so I send it as I should a blood and thunder one if they ordered it for money is my end and aim just now" (L 67). See Anne E. Boyd, *Writing for Immortality: Women and the Emergence of High Literary Culture in America* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004) 209-214.

³³ Barbara Sicherman argues that the time between volumes allowed readers to influence the plot, an important element in its long-term appeal. While it is certainly true that the creation and publication of part two of *Little Women* depended on the sales of the first volume, the process of serialization was a very familiar one to Alcott. Already well-practiced at writing serial stories for magazines such as *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Weekly*, Alcott was adept at the difficult art of creating a narrative that was both self-contained but also hinted at future possibilities. Madeleine Stern positions Alcott's growing professional skill with the characteristics she developed working for the periodical presses: "the difficult combination of brevity and interest" and "the cliff-hanger technique." See Barbara Sicherman, "Reading *Little Women*: The Many Lives of a Text," *Little Women, Or, Meg, Jo, Beth and Amy*, eds. Gregory Eiselein and Anne K. Phillips (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 2004); Stern, *Louisa May Alcott: From Blood and Thunder to Hearth and Home*.

³⁴ The first volume of *Little Women* closes by describing the "first act of the domestic drama, called 'Little Women,'" and places the fate of a second "act" on the novel's reception (LW 246). Alcott's October 30, 1868 journal entry records Niles' request for *Little Women: Part Two*: "Mr. N. wants a second volume for the spring. Pleasant notices and letters arrive, and much interest in my little women, who seem to find friends by their truth to life, as I hoped" (J 167). Her 1 Nov. 1868 entry continues: "Began the second part of 'Little Women.' I can do a chapter a day, and in a month I mean to be done" (J 167). Alcott sent *Little Women: Part Two* to Roberts Brothers on New Year's Day, 1869. According to Myerson and Shealy, "All 2000 copies of the first printing of *Little Women* were sold in September [1868]. Another 4,500 were printed by the end of the year" (J 169).

³⁵ Clark 69; Cheney 191.

created the stir that the success of the first part seemed to render certain.”³⁶ The “stir” generated by the first volume’s success ensured that readers “[would] not fail to avail themselves of the first opportunity to obtain [the second volume].”³⁷

During the seven-month hiatus between volumes, readers wrote furiously to Alcott, often addressing her as “Jo,” in order to uncover how much truth lay in the fictional tale of the March family. The perceived fluidity between Alcott and Jo influenced reader responses to Alcott’s work, as illustrated by Nelly’s letter featured in the advertisement for *Little Women*. Both Alcott and Niles perpetuated this fluidity between author and character, often addressing or signing correspondence to one another with the name “Jo March” or “Aunt Jo.”³⁸ Niles continued this practice when writing to other business associates, describing “Jo” reading a “flattering notice of her new book” in a letter to a reviewer, for example.³⁹

However, while Alcott would soon learn to articulate her frustration with a public audience that equated the author with her published works (and thereby justified their curiosity in her private life), Niles, in his role as publisher, recognized the value in publicizing both the printed works and the personal life of his firm’s star author. Niles repeatedly suggested that Alcott publish her selected letters to her family, written while in Europe following the publication of *Little Women*, as a collection entitled, “Jo’s Letters Home to the March Family.” In addition, he urged that she choose from “the million or less letters” from readers she received to publish a volume of “Letters to Jo by Little Women and Little Men.”⁴⁰ In both cases, Niles

³⁶ *Boston Post* 74.103 (1 May 1869), quoted in Clark 72.

³⁷ *Springfield Daily Union* (24 April 1869), quoted in Clark 71.

³⁸ Sicherman 642.

³⁹ Kilgour 102.

⁴⁰ Sicherman 642 (n.1).

pressed Alcott to treat her private correspondence as publishable material when repackaged as a fictional product created or received by Jo March. Although his suggestions were intended to capitalize on Jo March's popularity, the proposed collections were also clever attempts to reinforce links between author and character, a lucrative publicity strategy that continues to generate interest in Alcott and her works. To be sure, Alcott herself also suggested March family "spin-off" collections. Writing from Switzerland in August of 1870, Alcott encouraged Niles to collect several of her previously published stories under the title, "Jo March's Necessity Stories" in time for the Christmas holidays (L 145). Six volumes of "Aunt Jo's Scrap Bag" again drew upon her beloved character to entice readers.⁴¹ But while Alcott's suggestion to collect her previously published stories under Jo March's name certainly proves her willingness to trade upon Jo's popularity, Niles' attempts to publish her private correspondence undermined the fragile distinction between Alcott and her fictional character by attributing Alcott's real correspondence to the fictional Jo. Neither collection of letters was ever completed, however, which may signal Alcott's own discomfort with the proposed projects.⁴²

⁴¹ The series began with *Aunt Jo's Scrap Bag: My Boys* (1871) and continued with *Aunt Jo's Scrap Bag: Shawl-Straps* (1872), *Aunt Jo's Scrap Bag: Cupid and Chow-Chow* (1873), *Aunt Jo's Scrap Bag: My Girls* (1877), *Aunt Jo's Scrap Bag: Jimmy's Cruise in a Pinafore* (1879), *Aunt Jo's Scrap Bag: An Old-Fashioned Thanksgiving* (1882).

⁴² Roberts Brothers did capitalize on Alcott's private correspondence in their advertising; Niles placed an advertisement in the 29 Dec. 1869 issue of the *Boston Daily Evening Transcript* that reprinted the firm's cover letter to Alcott which accompanied her \$2500 Christmas royalty check for *Little Women*, as well as her gracious reply. By turning the private transaction into a public interaction, Roberts Brothers reinforced the popularity of Alcott's book by publicizing "the amount due the author for copyright on six months' sales." Reproducing Alcott's private reply for the reading public also gave Roberts Brothers an opportunity to underscore their cordial relationship with the author, as her letter refers to the "rough places made smooth by the courtesy and kindness of those who have proved themselves 'friends' as well as 'publishers'" (L 129). The excerpt of the advertisement is quoted in Gloria T. Delamar, *Louisa May Alcott and "Little Women": Biography, Critique, Publications, Poems, Songs, and Contemporary Relevance* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland and Co., Inc., 1990).

“Going beyond the book”

The tempting potential for access to Alcott’s real life associated with the “*Little Women* style” was a crucial contributing factor to the novel’s success. The decision to draw her characters “from life” irreversibly blurred the distinction between “the writer” and “the book” that she articulated in her letter to her Concord neighbor. Alcott’s stylistic choice was a violation of her own insistent distinction between the writer and her book, and as a result, many readers interpreted Alcott’s “*Little Women* style” as not simply a glimpse of an idealized New England family, but a truthful representation of the Alcott family. For many readers, gaining access to Jo’s fictional, interior life through the act of reading was analogous to accessing Louisa May Alcott’s private life. Therefore, readers’ responses to *Little Women* reveal the emotional connection readers felt to both the text of *Little Women* and its author, regardless of Alcott’s desire that the book and the author remain separate in the minds and hearts of the public. The conflation of Alcott and Jo March encouraged readers to engage in an active collaboration between fantasy and reality that brought the world of *Little Women* into their own lives. One contemporary reviewer described this interplay between fantasy and reality: “one tenderhearted little damsel goes quite beyond the book and wishes to know ‘where she can find a Laurie, for he just suits her, and she is dying to find just such a delightful boy.’”⁴³ In another instance, a reader described “a favorite amusement”: “[I] look for people from the ‘book world’ when I am out, and often I meet Jo, Laurie, and Amy from ‘Little Women’ (one of the loveliest books in the world), and Rose, Mac, and Uncle Alec from ‘Eight Cousins.’”⁴⁴ The search for “real life” versions of Jo, Laurie, Amy and other fictional characters signals a nearly seamless integration of the reader’s reality and a corresponding “book world.”

⁴³ Clark 69.

⁴⁴ The letter was printed in the December 1882 edition of *St. Nicholas*; Clark 90.

Readers “go beyond the book” in their attempt to integrate these fictional and experiential realities, thus moving “beyond” the rigid separation of the fictional and the real that characterizes the act of reading. The bounded isolation of the material text represents this separation of fictional and real: metaphors of reading as a window or portal into a different consciousness or experience mirror the materiality of a printed text that must be opened to be brought into contact with the “real life” of the reader. The very notion of a fictional text acting as a window into another world emphasizes the “otherworldliness” of fiction and its established status beyond or outside of day-to-day “real life.” Readers who describe their ability to meaningfully incorporate fictional experiences into their own lives and vice versa thwart the separation of the fictional and the real, thereby challenging the validity of this separation. Such reader responses to Alcott’s fiction offer important insights into the ways in which readers blurred the boundary between reality and fiction by incorporating fictional characters and plotlines into their own lives.

By taking their experience of Alcott’s work “beyond” the boundaries of the reading experience, Alcott’s readers learned to interpret their own experiences through their readings of Alcott’s fiction. The “tenderhearted little damsel” develops her notion of attraction and compatibility by reading about Laurie, for example. Searching for “people from the book world,” the young reader searches for companionship and finds it both in the reading experience and in the affirming process of discovering “real life” versions of fictional characters. Not only did readers bring fictional characters into their personal lives, they also relied upon their experiences with Alcott’s fiction to both enrich and make sense of their own lives.

Although readers integrated fiction and reality by incorporating Alcott’s characters and plots into their lives, they also quite literally “went beyond the book” in their repeated attempts

to manipulate and alter her fiction.⁴⁵ Readers imagined alternative endings to *Little Women* in much the same way that twenty-first century readers pen “fan fiction” in an attempt to insert their own desires and storylines into recognizable and meaningful plotlines. Skilled at making the fictional personal, readers gravitated to what Wolfgang Iser describes as the narrative “gaps” that encourage interpretive action on the part of readers. In Iser’s formulation, narrative gaps emerge from the constant tension between the explicit and the implicit in a text; the gap emerges in the narrative when an expected event or emotional response is concealed. Therefore, as Iser claims, “the gaps function as a kind of pivot on which the whole text-reader relationship revolves.”⁴⁶ In *Little Women*, the most controversial of these interpretive gaps occurs when Jo March rejects Teddy Laurence’s marriage proposal. Alcott’s contemporary readers were certainly “spur[red] into action” by Jo’s decision, and readers continue to identify it as disruptive and unsatisfying.

The act of bridging or filling these narrative gaps results in communication between the text and the reader; the process of interpretation and discovery generates possibilities for a personal response to the text. Although Iser addresses the potential for communication between the printed word and the reader, Alcott’s readers extended the possibilities for communication by responding not only to the text, but also directly to Alcott. Contemporary readers initially tried to fill the narrative and emotional gap posed by Jo’s rejection of Laurie by writing letters to Alcott that questioned her about the relationship immediately after the publication of *Little Women*. On November 1, 1868 (one month after the publication of part

⁴⁵ James Machor describes the need to “historicize the reader and [their] experience” and to study “the dynamics of audience engagement” in analyses of nineteenth-century print culture and reader response. See James Machor, ed. *Readers in History: Nineteenth-century American literature and the contexts of response* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999) x-xi.

⁴⁶ Wolfgang Iser, “Interaction between Text and Reader,” *The Reader in the Text*, eds. Susan R. Suleiman and Inge Crosman (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980) 111.

one) she wrote in her journal: “Girls write to ask who the little women marry, as if that was the only end and aim of a woman’s life. I *won’t* marry Jo to Laurie to please anyone.”⁴⁷ Noting her trepidation about the second volume of the novel, Alcott confided to a friend that the pressure to “have people married off in a wholesale fashion...much afflicts me.” She continues: “Jo should have remained a literary spinster but so many enthusiastic young ladies wrote to me clamorously demanding that she should marry Laurie...and out of perversity I went and made a funny match for her. I expect vials of wrath to be poured out upon my head, but rather enjoy the prospect” (L 124-125). Alcott’s resistance to a marriage plot for Jo indicates her resistance to readers’ attempts to control her narrative and may also signal her discomfort departing from the blueprint of her own experience that informed the “*Little Women* style.”⁴⁸

Although Alcott predicted the disappointment of her readers and their ensuing “vials of wrath,” the response to her “funny match” for Jo March, in the guise of the disheveled, German, middle-aged Professor Bhaer, was stronger than even she expected. Ednah Cheney’s 1889 biography states that readers “wept aloud and refused to be comforted and in some instances were actually made ill by grief and excitement” when Jo rejected Laurie’s marriage proposal.⁴⁹ Cheney describes a powerful intersection of the fictional and the real; reading Alcott’s novel left a physical and emotional imprint on readers’ lives. Alcott received letters from readers throughout her lifetime that commented on Jo’s rejection of her childhood playmate, and some reviewers acknowledged that they were “not quite satisfied with [Jo’s] destiny and

⁴⁷ Cheney 141.

⁴⁸ Meigs describes Jo March as Alcott’s “projection of herself as married” in *Little Men*, going on to note that “this Jo [in *Little Men*] is pure fiction” (75). Of course, Meigs’ implication is that the Jo March of *Little Women* is not simply a projection of a fiction, but is instead a real representation of Alcott.

⁴⁹ Cheney 191.

think that in some way she ought to have married Laurie.”⁵⁰ Reviewers also cited feelings of betrayal over the match. Describing the “feelings of hearty friendship” toward Alcott that reading *Little Women* engendered, one reviewer went on to report readers’ unwillingness to “forgive Alcott,” not Jo March, for refusing Laurie.⁵¹ Here the popular conflation of Alcott and Jo has provocative consequences; readers don’t blame Alcott for *writing* the story, but instead for not accepting a marriage proposal from a fictional character.

Far from representing a compromise with readers, as some critics have argued, Jo’s marriage to Professor Bhaer is instead an example of Alcott’s attempt to censure readers for the desires they seek to impose upon her work.⁵² Just as she described her desire to “ridicule” certain readers in “Jo’s Last Scrape,” Alcott’s decision to separate Jo and Laurie reinforces her control over her text. Reading these incidents together, Alcott’s conviction *not* to marry Jo and Laurie (thus snubbing her readers’ desire) and the resulting emotional and physical disturbance of her readers has a powerful overtone of discipline and control. She rejected readers’ intrusive interpretations of her work that sought to control the ways in which both she and her texts were understood.

While Alcott’s audience assumed the correlation between the four March sisters and the four Alcott sisters, the novel’s popularity also spurred speculation about the “real Laurie.” While

⁵⁰ Clark 80.

⁵¹ Clark 77.

⁵² I disagree with Sicherman’s claim that “readers had an unusual say in determining Jo’s fate...[T]he aspect of the book that has frustrated generations of readers—the foreclosing of marriage between Jo and Laurie—thus represents a compromise between Alcott and her initial audience” (639). Alcott’s letters and diaries clearly prove her unwillingness to conform to her readers’ desires, as well as the pleasure she took in sabotaging their expectations. Alcott’s decision to marry Jo March was much more influenced by her publisher, Thomas Niles, than by reader expectations; see, for example, Alcott’s letter about the “perversity” of her publishers in not letting her “have her way” about marrying her characters (Stern, *Critical Essays* 87). Certainly Roberts Brothers’ demands were influenced by their judgment of public taste, but Sicherman’s claim seems to view compromise in the form of Prof. Bhaer where clearly many of her readers were profoundly dissatisfied with the fictional relationship between Jo and the Professor.

Alcott never denied a “real” counterpart for Laurie, she insisted throughout her life that the young hero of *Little Women* was an amalgamation of her “Polish boy” Ladislus Wisniewski, whom she met on her first trip to Europe, and her friend Alfred Whitman, consistently denying the rumor that the character Laurie was based upon Julian Hawthorne.⁵³ However, in a letter describing her visit to the Alcott home in Concord, one reader offers insight into Anna Alcott Pratt’s own interpretation of her sister’s famous character:

I asked who Laurie really was and Mrs. Pratt said it was hard to tell, that they knew a number of charming boys when they were young and he was like several different ones. But she herself thought he was really Julian Hawthorne, the writer, of whom you may have heard. It seems his father lived next to the Alcott family and Julian was a constant playfellow of theirs...Miss Louise thinks however that Laurie is a young Polish boy called ‘Laddie’ who was very kind to her abroad. Isn’t it funny that the two disagree? And doesn’t it seem to you that Miss Alcott should know best?⁵⁴

The humorous query “shouldn’t Miss Alcott know best?” draws attention to the tension over interpretative control in a novel that Alcott, her publishers, and her readers acknowledged as “drawn from life.” It is not surprising that Anna Alcott Pratt, who referred to herself in letters as “Meg,” would feel authorized to speak about the novel’s “truth to life.” However, her direct contradiction of Louisa May Alcott’s explanation of Laurie’s “real life” counterpart is striking. That the “two disagree” is indicative of the conflicting interpretations that surround Alcott’s text. Readers, reviewers, and Alcott’s own family and friends proclaimed their desire to reinterpret or rewrite *Little Women*. The well-publicized connections between fiction and reality encouraged readers to believe that they were able to both interact with and influence a “real life” Jo in the person of Alcott. Just as Anna generated a dissenting opinion about the “real Laurie,”

⁵³ In a letter to Alfred Whitman, she explained “‘Laurie’ is you and my Polish boy ‘jintly.’ You are the sober half and my Ladislus (whom I met abroad) is the gay whirligig half, he was a perfect dear” (*L* 120). In her letter to Miss Holmes, Alcott wrote, “‘Tom’ is no more Edward Emerson than ‘Laurie’ is Julian Hawthorne. None of the characters in my books are drawn from life but the Marches. Never believe anything ‘they’ say, or anything you see in the papers. Its never true (*L* 167-168). Meigs claims that Bronson Alcott and Anna Alcott Pratt also suggested Llewellyn Willis, a former boarder, as a model for Laurie (69).

⁵⁴ Shealy 25.

readers also dismissed Alcott's interpretation of her text in favor of their own, as evidenced by the furor over Jo's rejection of Laurie.

Alcott's separation of Jo and Laurie represents a narrative gap that contemporary readers attempted to fill by challenging her authorial control and that twentieth-century scholars have interpreted as a denial of her own desires or her rejection of an initial marriage plot for Jo.⁵⁵ Yet, regardless of *how* readers respond to the disruptive separation of Jo and Laurie, Alcott's decision *not* to pair Laurie and Jo together continues to motivate readings and re-readings of the text. This narrative gap provided an ideal space for readers to insert themselves into the text and articulate their own desires for the fictional characters and their own lives. Alcott's nineteenth- and twentieth-century readers share their desire for an alternative resolution to Jo's and Laurie's relationship. Just as Alcott's contemporary readers and reviewers expressed their disappointment over Jo's marriage to Professor Bhaer, Simone de Beauvoir wrote that reading Jo's rejection of Laurie caused her to see herself as "a character out of a novel" and empowered her to imaginatively reconstruct an ending to the novel in which Jo and Laurie marry later in life.⁵⁶ Imagining her own life in fictional terms while also asserting her will over Alcott's fictional text, Simone de Beauvoir's response highlights readers' ability to seamlessly blend fictional and real experiences in their own lives.

⁵⁵ Critical interpretations of Alcott's decision to separate Jo and Laurie vary widely. For example, Angela M. Estes and Kathleen Margaret Lant describe Alcott's separation of Jo and Laurie, and Jo's resulting marriage to Professor Bhaer as a "horror" and her attempt to negotiate readers' demands for the ending as a "crime" in "Dismembering the Text: The Horror of Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*" *Children's Literature* 17 (1989): 98-123. Sicherman's study of reader responses to *Little Women* notes that the disappointment over the separation motivated readers to imagine alternative endings to the novel, 649. Both Elizabeth Lennox Keyser and Sarah Elbert argue that Jo and Laurie represented what Keyser terms an "androgynous wholeness" that Alcott believed was impossible to sustain in "society as it was constituted." See Elizabeth Lennox Keyser, *Whispers in the Dark: The Fiction of Louisa May Alcott* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1993) 67; Sarah Elbert, *A Hunger for Home: Louisa May Alcott's Place in American Culture*.

⁵⁶ Quoted in Sicherman 649.

One of the most powerful examples of readers' interplay between fiction and reality are the recurring claims by readers to *be* Jo March. Readers frequently wrote to Alcott claiming not that they wanted to be like Jo, but instead that they *were* Jo. Bringing the world of fiction into their own lives, readers lived the experiences in *Little Women* as their own. One young fan wrote to Alcott asserting not only that she and her three sisters were "the little women," but that Alcott must have had her family in mind when writing the novel. She identifies so wholeheartedly with Jo's character that she considers herself to *be* Jo.⁵⁷ By maintaining that the novel is based on her own family rather than Alcott's, the reader illustrates that her reading experience directly influences her immediate reality. The five Lukens sisters also initially wrote to Alcott to compare themselves to "the little women" and to share their experiences running their own family newspaper, modeled after the March family's *Pickwick Portfolio*, which in turn was inspired by the Alcott's family magazine of the same name. The Lukens sisters' establishment of a successful periodical inspired by Alcott's fictional rendition of a family magazine is an important moment of interplay between the text and the reader. The Lukens sisters' ability to re-create the fictional *Pickwick Portfolio*, and the amazing success of their publication venture, represent a unique cross-pollination between Alcott's biography, her fiction, and her reader's reality.⁵⁸

Thus for some readers, a personal identification with the text led to an intense identification with Jo's fictional character. Yet their identification with and appropriation of the fictional Jo becomes even more complex when one considers the contemporary correlation between Alcott and Jo March. Going beyond what Alcott describes in "Jo's Last Scrape" as the

⁵⁷ The fan letter from Annie Adams was printed in the February 1878 edition of *St. Nicholas* (Clark 87).

⁵⁸ Alcott's letters to the sisters praise their accomplishment and offer business advice (L 168, 176, 177, 185). The editors of Alcott's letters, Myerson, Shealy and Stern, note that the Lukens' magazine began as a handwritten newspaper but grew remarkably. Typeset by the third issue, the journal had over one thousand subscribers when it was sold.

public's attempt to possess and control the private life of a celebrity author, readers who claimed to be Jo March complicate this act of possession by assuming the identity of a fictional character recognized by her contemporaries as representative of Alcott herself. Indeed, Alcott's integration of real events and persons with her fiction continues to shape the terms of her reception, as well as the reception of her best-known novel. The sustained popularity of *Little Women* has prompted new generations of readers to imaginatively interact with both Alcott and Jo March by reading (and re-reading) *Little Women*, visiting Orchard House, and writing Alcott-inspired fan fiction. In *Miss Alcott's Email* (2006), Kit Bakke provides an extensive example of this enduring desire to communicate with, and in some cases assume the identity of, Alcott. *Miss Alcott's Email*, equal parts personal memoir and Alcott biography, consists of an imagined email correspondence between Bakke, writing in the early twenty-first century, and Alcott, writing in the final days of her life in the spring of 1888. Through this fictional correspondence, Bakke maintains that "Louisa will have a chance to speak out one more time...and she can learn the fate of her own most heartfelt causes."⁵⁹ Despite Bakke's interest in providing Alcott with a final opportunity for social commentary, the obvious irony is that the voice credited to Alcott is, of course, Bakke's own. Bakke's assumption of Alcott's identity in her project allows her to set the terms of their discussion, to dictate Alcott's response, and to shape Alcott's literary legacy.⁶⁰ Yet perhaps the most intriguing aspect of *Miss Alcott's Email* is the way in which Bakke layers her personal memoir with Alcott's biography. Described as a "bio-memoir," the text draws parallels between the lives of Bakke and Alcott, illustrating Alcott's relevance for a larger audience by emphasizing the impact of Alcott's life and work on Bakke's life. Her desire to appropriate

⁵⁹ Kit Bakke, *Miss Alcott's Email: Yours for Reform of All Kinds* (Boston: David R. Godine, 2006) xiii.

⁶⁰ Notably, Bakke uses her fictional correspondence with Alcott to both acknowledge and deride the popularity of *Little Women*, going so far as to bar *Little Women* from the "Suggestions for Further Reading" because "Louisa did not think it best represented her life or her work, nor do I" (254).

Alcott's identity for the purposes of social commentary is inspired by the same impulse that continues to make Orchard House a popular tourist destination for Alcott's fans: assimilating Alcott, Jo March, *Little Women*—or a combination of all three—into one's everyday life. Indeed, the desire to communicate with Alcott “one more time” continues, regardless of whether the voice that responds is, in fact, one's own.

Readers' attempts to identify personally with Alcott and her fictional character resonate with Walt Whitman's own attempt to generate both intimacy with and distance from his reading audience in *Leaves of Grass*. As Terry Mulcaire argues, Whitman's famous pronouncement in “So Long,” “Camerado, this is no book/Who touches this touches a man...It is I you hold and who holds you,” is the poet's “[claim] that he is bodily present to his readers within the book they are reading.”⁶¹ Although *Little Women* is not fraught with the eroticism of *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman's formulation of a text as a stand-in for a person is also significant in characterizing Alcott's relationship with her text. While Whitman's claim that “who touches this touches a man” emphasizes his corporeal availability to his audience, Alcott's *Little Women* could similarly be prefaced by the assertion that “who reads this reads a family” or “who knows Jo March knows Louisa May Alcott.” Moreover, Mulcaire argues that those readers who expressed a desire for realized physical interaction with Whitman caused him to retreat from his initial claim of intimate availability and instead convince readers that “it was a mistake to read through the book to his person.”⁶² By briefly highlighting Whitman's retreat from his readers' literal interpretation of physical presence within the text, I seek to illuminate Alcott's own response to the persistent correlation between her life and that of her fictional character. Both Alcott and Whitman were complicit in encouraging readers to equate their texts with themselves in very specific ways, and

⁶¹ Terry Mulcaire, “Publishing Intimacy in *Leaves of Grass*,” *ELH* 60:2 (Summer 1993): 471-501, 471.

⁶² Mulcaire 491.

both became frustrated with readers who did not respond appropriately to the conflation of author and text. Yet for Alcott, the intensity of readers' emotional responses to her text is always further complicated by readers' claims to be Jo March. Unlike Whitman, Alcott does not have to negotiate the physical parameters of her presence in the text, but importantly, she must police the boundaries of her own identity as enthusiastic fans adopted her fictional creation as their own.

Readers' claims to be Jo March continue; many scholars and authors, most of them female, continue to vocalize their kinship with the character. Analyzing Jo's continued popularity, Barbara Sicherman argues that for women coming of age in the mid-twentieth century, "Jo, always the most admired sister, was for many the only one who mattered."⁶³ Testimonials from readers reveal that the character of Jo March continues to be a lightning rod for emotional reader responses in much the same way that it was during Alcott's lifetime. For example, Barbara Kingsolver's claim that "I, personally, am Jo March" echoes earlier readers who also identified so completely with Alcott's fictional character that they literally assumed her identity.⁶⁴ Ann Petry's assertion that "I felt as though I was part of Jo and she was part of me" articulates the sense of shared experience between fictional character and real reader that also recalls contemporary readers' responses.⁶⁵

Personal reflections about the significance of *Little Women* and Jo March, such as Kingsolver's and Petry's, frequently appear in critical studies of Alcott. The ubiquity of these personal statements in the landscape of Alcott scholarship signals their purpose as a validation

⁶³ Sicherman 635.

⁶⁴ Alberghene and Clark xvii.

⁶⁵ Literary critics universally claim Jo, not Amy, Meg, or Beth, as the locus of their emotional response to *Little Women*. Speaking for scores of twentieth-century readers and critics, Sonia Sanchez claimed "I didn't identify with Beth and all the others...they were too formal, and they were the women you expected them to be, but Jo broke the mold." Quoted in Alberghene and Clark xvi.

of the novel and its continued significance. Simone de Beauvoir's contention that she "identified [her]self passionately with Jo" is featured in numerous critical studies of *Little Women*, as is the implicit argument that testimony from high-profile scholars and authors about the novel's significance in their personal lives is a valid foundation for further critical attention.⁶⁶ Similarly, Cynthia Ozick's contention that she "read *Little Women*...ten thousand times. I am Jo in her 'vortex,' not Jo exactly, but some Jo-of-the-future" is included in the introductions to several major pieces of Alcott scholarship.⁶⁷ The strategic use of these comments underscores the fact that literary critics, especially those instrumental in reclaiming Alcott's work, are often engaged in a twin struggle to reclaim Alcott's work for scholarly attention while wrestling with disappointment and anger over Alcott's storyline for Jo March.⁶⁸ Notably, a personal connection to Jo March is often cited as a motivating force behind Alcott scholarship. For example, Shirley Foster and Judy Simons, editors of *What Katy Read*, cite their early identification with Jo March with inspiring the development of their project.⁶⁹

Scholars' personal connection with Jo March often results in criticism that perpetuates, rather than interrogates, the conflation of Alcott and her fictional character. Just as this conflation of author and character resulted in complex reader responses in the nineteenth

⁶⁶ Quoted in Alberghene and Clark, xv and Sicherman, 649.

⁶⁷ Ozick is quoted in Elaine Showalter, "*Little Women*: The American Female Myth" *Sister's Choice: Tradition and Change in American Women's Writing* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991) 42; Sicherman 634; and Alberghene and Clark xv.

⁶⁸ As Alberghene and Clark argue, the "women's movement provided an environment hospitable to reevaluating Alcott" (xxx). While the novel never went out of print and topped many best seller and "influential" lists throughout the twentieth century, critical attention to Alcott was initiated by feminist scholars. See Nina Auerbach, "Austen and Alcott on Matriarchy: New Women of New Wives," *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction* 10:1 (Fall 1976); Fetterley, Judith. "Alcott's Civil War"; Karen Halttunen, "The Domestic Drama of Louisa May Alcott," *Feminist Studies* 10 (Summer 1984): 233-254; see Ann Douglas' Introduction to *Little Women* (New York: Signet, 1983); Elaine Showalter, "*Little Women*: The American Female Myth"; and Frances Armstrong, "'Here Little, Hereafter Bliss': *Little Women* and the Deferral of Greatness," *American Literature* 64:3 (September 1992): 453-474.

⁶⁹ Foster and Simons ix.

century, it also has provocative consequences for literary scholarship. For example, many scholars interpret Jo's curtailed literary career as representative of the need for a more comprehensive recovery of women's fiction. Scholars frequently mine *Little Women* for accurate biographical information in an attempt to analyze Alcott's supposed foreclosure of literary opportunity, thereby reifying the interchangeability of Alcott and her fictional character.⁷⁰ This methodological approach oversimplifies Alcott's role in fashioning the fictional Jo March by reading Jo as confession rather than character; in these readings Jo is both the representative of Alcott's own capitulation to financial and professional pressures and an indictment of the culture that could foment those same pressures. Criticism that utilizes this methodology is invested in rescuing Jo March from a story that is disappointing to many readers; by rescuing her, there is also an attempt to rescue Alcott from critical neglect and from the limitations imposed on her career by her health, her family, and her own authorial choices. Critics who read Jo as an accurate representation of Alcott are in danger of buying into Alcott's own representation of a self, not a representation of reality. Initiated with the publication of *Little Women*, this equation of Alcott and Jo continues to influence how scholars approach the text, as critical readers continue searching for the historical Alcott in the fictional Jo.

"Fooling with the Audience" in *A Modern Mephistopheles*

By re-inscribing the conflation of Jo March and Louisa May Alcott in their scholarship, many contemporary literary critics read Jo's decision to renounce writing sensational fiction as Alcott's own rejection of her "blood and thunder" style. In this critical trajectory, Alcott's Faustian drama of authorial deception, *A Modern Mephistopheles*, is often characterized as a

⁷⁰ Foster and Simons describe Jo as Alcott's "self-portrait" (92) and Showalter describes *Little Women* as "autobiography" (59).

rejection of “the *Little Women* style” and a return to the creative forcefulness of her pseudonymously published sensational fiction. Published anonymously as the sixth volume in Roberts Brothers’ No Name Series, the novel’s unique publication history fuels critical speculation that Alcott was unhappily confined to the domestic genre, only able to flex her sensational imagination under the guise of anonymity.⁷¹ Since critics nearly universally read Alcott’s “*Little Women* style” as a negative or confining influence on her career, her post-*Little Women* sensational fiction, including *A Modern Mephistopheles*, is primarily interpreted in terms of its contrast with and rejection of the “*Little Women* style.” Therefore, critical analyses of *A Modern Mephistopheles* overlook the provocative connection between the questions of authorial style, authenticity, and audience manipulation that are posed by both the novel and its publication as part of the No Name Series. With a plot driven by an act of plagiarism and its repercussions, the novel offers important insight into Alcott’s own conception of an author’s relationship with and responsibilities to audiences, issues of particular interest to Alcott following the overwhelming popularity of *Little Women*. *A Modern Mephistopheles* and its publication medium interrogate the very foundation upon which Alcott’s readers attempted to claim a relationship with the author: both reject the accepted notion that readers could “know” authors by reading their texts. *A Modern Mephistopheles*, a novel whose publication history and plot both solicits and foils readers’ speculation about authorial identity, is Alcott’s most subtle and subversive comment about literary celebrity.

In order to consider *A Modern Mephistopheles* outside of the debate over sensation versus domesticity in Alcott’s fiction, it is vital to consider its unusual publication history. The No Name Series, the brainchild of Alcott’s longtime editor Thomas Niles, included fourteen novels published anonymously between September 1876 and December 1878, as well as the popular *A*

⁷¹ Stern argues that Alcott’s success prevented her from writing “passionate tales” (quoted in Elbert 283).

Masque of Poets, known today as the anonymous verse collection that featured Emily Dickinson's "Success."⁷² Publicity materials for the series encouraged readers and reviewers to guess the identity of contributing authors through careful reading and analysis of authorial style. The material texts also encouraged reader interaction by including advertisements that featured reviewers' "Guesses at the Authorship" of texts in the series (see Figure 6.2). Advertisements for the series skillfully emphasized the anonymity of the series while further stimulating curiosity by publishing names of "potential" authors in the series such as Alcott, Robert Louis Stevenson, Harriet Prescott Spofford, Helen Hunt Jackson, Susan Coolidge and Walt Whitman.

Niles acknowledged that secrecy was the key to the series' success. In a letter to a potential contributor, Niles notes the potential for an author's style to betray the anonymity of the series: "People say it will be impossible to keep the secret, for an author's style cannot be hidden; but though it may be easy enough to say, 'Oh! This is _____; anybody can tell his style,' *if it is not admitted*, there will be uncertainty enough to make it exciting; and create a demand—we hope a large one."⁷³ Explicit in Niles' statement is the reader's ability to recognize an author's style; implicit in Niles' publicity of the No Name Series is the belief in a reader's ability to "know" an author by means of his or her style. Niles' chief method of creating interest, maintaining the secrecy of the authors involved, indicates the belief on the part of readers and critics that an author's style was capable of revealing an author's identity. Niles agrees with the common perception that "it will be impossible to keep the secret, for an author's style cannot be hidden," and instead emphasizes absolute secrecy as the only means to stimulate "uncertainty enough to make it exciting." The initial publicity for the series certainly did arouse readers'

⁷² Madeleine Stern and Daniel Shealy, "The No Name Series," *Studies in the American Renaissance* (1991): 375-402.

⁷³ Quoted in Kilgour 141.

interest, as the *Chicago Daily Inter-Ocean* declared, “[Curious readers] will naturally stand on tiptoe, eager to discover through the author’s style his or her identity.”⁷⁴

Alcott’s letters and journals articulate her excitement about participating in the series and thereby hoodwinking the reading public. Alcott used the anonymity promised by the No Name Series not as a shield for her sensational style, but instead as one component of an elaborate ruse to confound readers who believed they could identify authors by their writing style. As she acknowledged in the preface to the second edition of the novel, published posthumously in 1889 under her name, her “chief aim” in writing for the No Name Series was to “puzzle readers,” many of whom “still insist that [*A Modern Mephistopheles*] could not have been written by the author of ‘Little Women.’”⁷⁵ Her remarks in the preface voice both her awareness that her reputation was shaped as “the author of ‘Little Women’” and her desire to “puzzle” a reading public that was, for the most part, unfamiliar with her pseudonymously published sensation stories.

After submitting her manuscript to Niles, Alcott noted in her accompanying letter, “now the fun will begin” (L 222). Her April 1877 journal entry notes: “‘M.M.’ appears and causes much guessing. It is praised and criticized, and I enjoy the fun, especially when friends say, ‘I know *you* didn’t write it, for you can’t hide your peculiar style.’” (J 204). Alcott clearly relished the “fun” of upsetting the expectations of readers and critics; that Alcott could in fact “hide [her] peculiar style” is, of course, the irony and the source of her amusement. Her response to the outpouring of curiosity and speculation surrounding the series highlights her own interest in rejecting the supposed immutability of authorial style. While the series and the publicity

⁷⁴ Quoted in Shealy and Stern, “No Name Series” 376.

⁷⁵ Quoted in Stern’s Introduction to *A Modern Mephistopheles* (New York: Praeger, 1987) xxxviii. All subsequent references will be included in the text, distinguished by *MM*.

surrounding it were premised on readers' ability to ferret out the identity of famous authors, Alcott took great pleasure in confounding those who assumed her style would be easily recognizable to careful readers. Alcott, who met secretly with Niles to discuss arrangements for *A Modern Mephistopheles* and asked her sister to copy the manuscript in order to disguise her

THE "NO NAME SERIES."

—♦—

GUESSES AT THE AUTHORSHIP

OF

"MERCY PHILBRICK'S CHOICE."

"'Aut Saxe Holm, aut Diabolus.' . . . Not that this verdict solves the conundrum, for there remains the further question, Who is Saxe Holm?—a question so complicated with assertions, denials, claims, and counter-claims, as to count among the foremost puzzles of the age." — *Boston Transcript*.

"Of it we premise this much, — that it was written by a woman. If no other earmarks were visible, the pretty little poems thickly interspersed within the volume would be sufficient to fix the sex of the writer." — *Syracuse Standard*.

"The pen of Saxe Holm — unless she have a double to undo her — is clearly recognizable in the initial volume of the series." — *Portland Press*.

"After all, the veil of concealment is not a very dense one, and it would not be difficult, we think, to lay this first bantling of the brood very near to its parents' door, if it were worth while to investigate small mysteries." — *New York Evening Post*.

"Doubtless from the pen of Saxe Holm, whose personality is one of the best kept secrets in the literary world." — *Hartford Post*.

"Speaking *sub rosa*, we think it is Elizabeth Stoddard Mary Clemmer Moulton." — *Boston Courier*.

"We cannot help crediting the authoress of 'Dorothy Fox' with having furnished this initial volume of the 'No Name Series.'" — *The Liberal Christian*.

"It is of no use to talk of 'Saxe Holm,' for that probably drags in another personage, and sheds a flood of darkness on the whole transaction. We advise everybody to read it, and select his own author." — *Hartford Courant*.

"We hazard the opinion that the author is H. H." — *New Haven Palladium*.

"It reads a little like Aldrich, and winds up very much in the same incomplete and irritating style as 'Prudence Palfrey.'" — *Chicago Inter-Ocean*.

"Two hands are visible in the work, as they were in 'Saxe Holm's' stories, which were evidently from the same workshop. I take one of these hands to belong to 'H. H.,' the other to a friend and admirer of hers." — *Springfield Republican*.

"If neither Mr. Scudder nor Mr. Weiss wrote the book, they will surely be offended at the imputation of having done so, and the wrath of the actual author will equal theirs." — *Boston Globe*.

"It is a work the source of which is worth guessing. . . . Three authors, whose first name is Harriet, are successively guessed to be the author of 'Mercy Philbrick's Choice,' — Harriet Beecher Stowe, Harriet W. Preston, and Harriet Prescott Spofford." — *Saturday Evening Gazette*.

"There is something in it that reminds one of Harriet W. Preston." — *Portland Transcript*.

"There is something more of Dr. Wendell Holmes about it; but, curiously enough, the book which it most readily brings to mind is one altogether dissimilar in tone and execution, Col. Higginson's 'Malbone.'" — *The London Academy*.

"We have no guess as to the authorship. It needs no artificial stimulus of curiosity to make the volume attractive to its last page." — *New York Examiner and Chronicle*.

"We give up the conundrum, and echo the query of the title-page, 'Is he (she) a great Unknown?'" — *The Unitarian Review*.

—♦—

ROBERTS BROTHERS, PUBLISHERS,
Boston.

Fig. 6.2: Promotion for the No Name Series included in *A Modern Mephistopheles*. The advertisement features reviews that speculate about the identity of authors in the series. From the copy in the Rare Book Collection, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

handwriting, certainly enjoyed the covert process involved in the publication of her novel.⁷⁶

However, as her journal describes, Alcott took the greatest pleasure in reading the unsuccessful attempts of readers and reviewers to unmask the author behind *A Modern Mephistopheles*. As one reviewer remarked after the publication of the posthumous second edition, the novel was evidence of “Miss Alcott’s versatile gifts, and her power to conceal her own identity.”⁷⁷ One of her “gifts,” as her gleeful response to the No Name Series proves, was not simply the concealment of her identity, but also her ability to confound the expectations of those who believed they could know her by reading her published work.

Reviews of *A Modern Mephistopheles* model the process of analysis used by readers to uncover the identities of the anonymous authors in the series. Reviewers published their speculations about authorship based upon their analyses of stylistic conventions such as language choice, setting, theme, and tone. Reviewers gamely tackled the challenge posed by the anonymous series and devoted significant attention to uncovering the identities of the authors featured in the series. The vast majority of reviewers credited Harriet Prescott Spofford and Julian Hawthorne with the authorship of *A Modern Mephistopheles*. In a highly favorable review of the novel, the reviewer for *The Atlantic Monthly* gushed, “We have not much doubt that Julian Hawthorne is the author of *A Modern Mephistopheles*; and the belief should be understood as implying a compliment to his powers, for the book is certainly a remarkable one.”⁷⁸ The *Home Journal* staunchly averred, “Mrs. Harriet Prescott Spofford is said to be the author of the work, and the literary style and the method of treatment, as well as the conception of the story, are

⁷⁶ Madeleine Stern, *Louisa May Alcott* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1950) 266-267.

⁷⁷ Clark 302.

⁷⁸ Clark 294. Anne Boyd draws attention to a highly favorable review of *A Modern Mephistopheles* in the *Atlantic Monthly* that attributed the novel to Julian Hawthorne. In contrast, the magazine published a condescending review of Alcott’s *An Old-Fashioned Girl*; Boyd argues that the disparity of the two reviews had much to do with genre; see Boyd 213.

both undisguisedly hers.” “Who wrote it?” questioned *The Boston Post*, going on to avow that the author was, “if not a master, then one who has the certainty of mastership within him.” *Godey’s Lady’s Book* offered another general opinion about the author: “We should judge...that it was written by a young person, probably a girl, with much literary facility and fluency, [who] with advancing years and a larger experience...may make her mark.” In direct contrast, the *Daily Evening Traveler* proclaimed that the “the style of the writer is that of no novice. Some hand of skill has been at work here.” Another reviewer names Julian Hawthorne, Spofford, Augusta Evans, Alcott, and Oliver Wendell Holmes as possible authors.⁷⁹ These reviews are remarkable for the wide array of authorial identities linked to Alcott’s text: male and female, young and old, Alcott’s authorial style is chameleon-like in its ability to transcend boundaries of age, style, and gender. Yet despite reviewers’ frequent incorrect guesses at authorial identity, each guess is rooted in the notion that style leaves an unmistakable trace of the author’s personality in the text.

While Alcott certainly relished the opportunity to destabilize contemporary ideas about authorial style as a marker of identity, *A Modern Mephistopheles* reinforces the authorial deception and audience manipulation at the heart of the No Name Series. In the novel, Alcott rejects the notion that authorial style reflects an authentic identity by centering the novel on acts of plagiarism and imitation that are only made possible because the “modern Mephistopheles,” Jasper Helwyze, correctly calibrates his deception to the expectations of the fictional reading audience. Her position as an author hiding her true identity from the public, the premise behind the No Name Series, identifies Alcott most closely with the diabolical Jasper Helwyze.

After rescuing a despondent young poet, Felix Canaris, from attempted suicide following his disappointing literary debut, Helwyze enters into a secret agreement with his young protégée

⁷⁹ Quoted in Clark: *Home Journal*, 296, *The Boston Post*, 290, *Godey’s Lady’s Book*, 295, *Daily Evening Traveler*, 285, and (anonymous), 301.

that binds them together throughout the novel. Readers are uncertain as to the nature of this bargain: however, Helwyze's hold over Canaris is a strong one, as he exercises control over Canaris's romantic life and commands the poet to marry a young woman named Gladys. Felix and Gladys marry and grow to love one another, while Helwyze gradually learns that his ability to control Canaris is endangered by the hold Gladys now has upon him. In a dramatic conclusion, Gladys dies in childbirth, Helwyze confesses his love for Gladys, Canaris rejects the man he has bound himself to, and ultimately the secret shame that bound Canaris to Helwyze is revealed: it was Jasper Helwyze, not young Canaris, who wrote the two volumes of verse that brought praise and fame to Canaris.

Canaris's confession to Gladys reveals that Helwyze initiated the fraud in order to ensnare the younger man through the "intoxicating" admiration and praise of the reading public (*MM* 153). "With much private jesting about literary frauds and borrowed plumage," Canaris claimed authorship of a collection of poems that contained only a handful of his own verses, and Helwyze conceded that the "praise and honor...pleased that vain boy as much as fooling the public amused me" (*MM* 271). Helwyze's contempt for the reading public, the critics who receive Canaris's plagiarized volume, and the ensuing praise he receives, motivate his literary deception while his amusement over "fooling the public" also links him directly to Alcott. Yet in spite of the obvious premeditation of this literary deception, there are few consequences for its architect, Jasper Helwyze. Ultimately, Helwyze suffers not for "fooling with the public" but for falling in love with Gladys. Although he briefly acknowledges the impending fallout of his literary deception by stating "tongues will wag, and I shall be tormented. I shall seem the gainer, he the loser; but it will not be so," his "torment" will come from Gladys's death, not from his deception of readers (*MM* 272). The ease with which he is able to gauge readers' expectations and manipulate his own authorial identity goes largely unnoticed at the close of the novel. Even

Felix, his co-conspirator in this act of literary deception, though chastened, goes on to earn fame and praise as an actor.

Alcott's novel condemns Canaris's weakness in seeking fame and praise above all else, while also satirizing the fickle mistress of fame that rewards his deception and punishes his confession. Alcott does little to condemn the authorial deception practiced by the two men. The initial success of their plot, and the ease with which Canaris assumes the style and identity of Helwyze, confirms Alcott's own resistance to the popular notion that authorial style was a transparent window into authorial identity. By exploring these questions of audience manipulation and authorial deception in a novel enshrouded in anonymity and a publicity blitz that encouraged readers to speculate about authorial identity, Alcott does not, as critics have suggested, hide behind the anonymity of the No Name Series. Rather, the novel and its publication medium interrogate the very foundation upon which Alcott's readers attempted to claim a relationship with the author by rejecting the accepted notion that an author could be known by reading his or her text. The novel and the No Name Series together illustrate Alcott's ability to "fool" with her reading public by transforming anonymity and plagiarism into a creative and seemingly paradoxical dance of authorial self-revelation and disguise.

Epilogue

How slow and sure they set their types!
How small editions ran!
Then 50,000 never sold—
Before the sale began.

For how could they, poor plodding souls,
Be either swift or wise,
Who never learned the mighty art
Of how to advertise.

--James T. Fields, "Complimentary Fruit and
Flower Festival," 1855

In the last days of September 1855, nearly one thousand people gathered in the Crystal Palace in New York to attend the "Complimentary Fruit and Flower Festival." The festival, an evening banquet, was given by the New York Publishers' Association to honor nearly five hundred editors, authors and their guests. Suspended above the main banquet table, organizers strung a banner reading "HONOR TO GENIUS," illumined by lamps. At crowded tables the various orders of the literati mingled together: editors, magazinists, publishing house magnates, and, the most elite, literary celebrities. This last category of attendee was ostensibly responsible for the most remarkable feature of the "Fruit and Flower Festival": three hundred gallery seats were reserved for audiences interested in witnessing the festival banquet. Gallery observers did not share in the banquet, participate in the program honoring attendees, or interact with celebrities; their primary function was to observe, to gaze upon the embodied public personalities as they consumed a somewhat disconcertingly public meal. In all of its glorious oddity, its manufactured sense of

community, and its expressly limited intimacy between audience and celebrity, the “Fruit and Flower Festival” thrust the authors, readers, and publishers present into a highly specific, intensified iteration of the changing print public sphere that was fueled by mass media and public personalities. The Festival serves as a stunning example of the ways in which authors, readers, and publishers were both complicit in and resistant to the perpetuation of celebrity culture in the antebellum period.

According to organizers, the Festival was intended to assuage tensions between publishers, authors, and booksellers, yet as many contemporaries quickly realized, the event was less concerned with professional unity than it was with publicity. Under a guise of honoring literary professionals, the Publishers’ Association banquet provided an opportunity to showcase famous talents and to court eager audiences by opening the event up to the gallery audience and covering the event extensively in the periodical presses. As Michael Newbury observes, “the festival, in all its gaudy self-consciousness, was a publicity stunt, the presentation by the publishers of authors and other notables before the public.”¹ Rather than simply satisfying readers’ interest in the public personalities they knew through print, organizers used the gallery tickets as a means to foment interest in the event. The three hundred allotted gallery tickets were quickly distributed in advance of the event; most were given away. Publishers then advertised the ensuing demand for tickets, enhancing the actual demand for seats through promotion of the event and emphasis on the swift distribution of tickets.

While the festival was certainly a “self-conscious...publicity stunt,” as Newbury claims, industry insiders were not only publicizing famous authors at the event. Much praise was reserved for publishers and their ability to produce, distribute, and sell record numbers

¹ Michael Newbury, *Figuring Authorship in Antebellum America* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997) 80.

of texts. In his poetic toast, James Fields characterized the rapid transformation of the publishing industry in the past two decades; lamenting the necessity of limited editions and the painstaking setting of type, Fields condescends to the “poor, plodding” publishers of the recent past “Who never learned the mighty art/Of how to advertise.”² Fields’ tribute is less a celebration of literary celebrity and more a pat on the back for the industry that creates and feeds upon that celebrity. Indeed, the Fruit and Flower Festival is noteworthy for its unabashed promotion of the art and craft of publicity; in a play on the more traditional creation and marketing of printed texts, publishers acted as brokers of authenticity and intimacy by bringing together celebrities and audiences in the festival space. Editors and publishers were the critical mediators in author-reader relationships that traded upon intimate exchange; as this study has shown, this influence came in many shapes and sizes: George Graham’s pioneering management, publicity, and control of his “stable” of contributors, Fields’ distribution of an alternative Hawthorne persona, one that revealed more than the author perhaps intended to share, Robert Bonner’s brilliant use of advertisements in competitors’ magazines to stir interest in Fern’s columns, and finally, Roberts Brothers’ prodigious and creative management of Alcott’s career. At the Fruit and Flower Festival, publishers capitalized on the concept of celebrity by encouraging authors to appear at the banquet to function chiefly *as* celebrities, thus further promoting their own literary status, as well.

Audiences were drawn to the gallery seats of the Festival to gaze upon a celebrity feast by the compelling promise of authorial interiority. Disseminated in authors’ printed texts and their public lives, as narrated in gossip columns, periodicals, and publicity materials, authorial interiority, that promised glimpse into the interior life of the celebrity, laid the

² Quoted in Newbury 79.

foundation for any real or imagined emotional exchange between readers and authors. In one sense, the rigid separation of the festival space would appear to deny any opportunity for intimate exchange between audiences and celebrities. A rigid hierarchy of significance was clearly established: celebrities were seated under a banner proclaiming their genius; audience members were set apart in the gallery, looking down on the festivities from a distance. Just as literary celebrities were mediated to audiences through their printed texts, authors at the festival were similarly mediated by the insistent separation of author and audience, genius and observer. It would seem, then, that Edgar Allan Poe's 1841 claim that audiences longed for glimpses of the bodies of well-known authors to satisfy a kind of emotionally charged curiosity was proven true at the 1855 Festival: "Next to the person of a distinguished man-of-letters, we desire to see his portrait—next to his portrait, his autograph..."³ Poe credits audiences with a "desire" for visual representations of literary figures that makes no claim for reciprocity or explicit exchange.

Yet the spectacle of the banquet, the central activity of the Festival, conveys a kind of corporeal intimacy upon the participants and observers present. Newbury argues that "the conspicuously public space" of the Festival actually made many of the honored attendees uncomfortable; their task of dining in front of an audience served as a compulsory, live performance of the kind of paradoxical intimacy that authors were learning to navigate in print.⁴ Most significant, however, the medium of exchange between audience and author was re-imagined and the action transferred from reader to author: whereas audiences traditionally consumed texts, celebrities were asked to consume a meal in front of a live audience. Accustomed to exchanges with audiences that were mediated by the inherent

³ Edgar Allan Poe, "Autography" *Graham's* 19.5 (Nov. 1841): 224-234.

⁴ Newbury 80.

distance of printed texts, authors were exposed to a new kind of intimate exchange that was mediated instead by the glaring machine of promotion, a disconcerting shift for many authors.

As David Haven Blake has argued, “celebrities emerged [in the antebellum period] as a new and rather effective means for representing the public to itself.”⁵ Yet this representational medium was a particularly corporeal one; the celebrity was a form of representation that originated in a physical form. This physical form, as discussed throughout this project, was an object of desire, curiosity, and speculation on the part of audiences. The Festival meal, observed from the gallery, underscored the corporeality of these literary celebrities in ways that were significant for observers. Joseph Roach argues that the unique physical duality of celebrities, and audience demands for such duality, are an important component of celebrity identity: “Celebrities, then, like kings, have two bodies, the body natural, which decays and dies, and the body cinematic, which does neither. But the immortal body of their image...always bears the nagging reminder of the former.”⁶ Physical bodies are expressly and permanently linked to their productions, and vice versa, in Roach’s formulation; even when the natural body ages or disappears, “immortal bodies,” or bodies of work, remain vibrant and alive in the minds of audiences. For this reason perhaps more than any other, the meal at the Fruit and Flower Festival was significant for observers in the gallery. Their limited exposure to literary celebrities was centered on a personal and inherently physical act. Seeing the bodies of these literary celebrities did more than satisfy

⁵ David Haven Blake, *Walt Whitman and the Culture of American Celebrity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006) 49.

⁶ Joseph Roach, *It* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007) 36.

curiosity; this was a way to stamp texts with the images of their producers, and as such, to create new pathways for emotional connection to texts.

It is tempting to imagine the observers in the gallery as dupes of an increasingly sophisticated publishing machine, one that was becoming increasingly efficient at using emotional connections between readers and authors to sell texts to an expanding national market. In this frame, authors in attendance were at the mercy of their manipulative editors and publishers. Yet it is important to remember that each individual at the Festival was there by choice, lured by the possibility of celebrity sightings, professional accolades, or a delicious meal. In addition, what is often cited as the most unusual aspect of the Festival, the separated gallery audience, is precisely the component that makes the Feast a celebrity event. As Roach argues, the public intimacy of celebrity was based upon both an “illusion of availability” and a “vicariousness” of experience.⁷ The Fruit and Flower Festival performed both functions; housed together in a shared, intimate space, there was certainly an “illusion” of celebrity availability for observers. The banquet was a vicarious experience for those ticket holders watching from above. The structure and program of the Festival reinforced both the “illusion of availability” and the “vicariousness” of shared experience that were crucial to constructions of public intimacy. Rather than arguing that audiences were deceived by a publicity stunt, or conned into delusions of intimacy with strangers, perhaps we should understand the observers’ acquiescence in this highly mediated exchange as evidence of how quickly audiences were adapting to and participating in the conventions of a new, modern culture of celebrity in nineteenth-century America.

⁷ Roach 3.

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